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Allegiances

[image]

APiEW, Part One
APiEW, Part Two

NIGHTCLAN

LEADER

Thistlestar - white tom with grey speckles and paws

DEPUTY

Wrenfeather - dappled golden-brown tom with a white paw

MEDICINE CATS

Rowanspots - brown tabby she-cat with orange spots on her muzzle

WARRIORS

Mistypool - deep grey molly with soft green eyes

Daisynose - cream-and-grey molly

Ferrettail - brown-and-white tom with a thick-furred tail
Apprentice; Falconpaw - muscular dark grey tom

Dawnstrike - cream-furred molly with striking green eyes
Apprentice; Icepaw - grey molly with a white underbelly

Sandfoot - pale orange tabby tom, amber eyes
Apprentice; Rookpaw - black-furred tom with a white chin

Dovesong - beautiful grey tabby molly with green eyes

Cindertalon - very dark grey tom with a few black toes

QUEENS

Mintwillow - dark silver-and-white tabby queen with green eyes, mother of Silverkit and Stormkit

Newtsplash - brown tortoisehell-tabby molly with pale amber eyes, mother of Wrenfeather's kits (Cricketkit, Waspkit)

KITS

Silverkit - silver tabby-point molly with blue eyes and a darker mask on her face

Stormkit - dark grey tom with tabby markings on his legs and tail, jade-colored eyes

Cricketkit - brown tom with brilliant amber eyes

Waspkit - golden tom with pale brown flecks

ELDERS

Lynxtail - greyish-brown molly with a shorter-than-usual tail

Warblerwing - golden tabby tom with curly cheek-tufts and tangled fur

Vinecrawl - sandy-yellow tabby molly

Snailbelly - pale brown tom with a white underbelly

MISTCLAN

LEADER

Lichenstar - pale ginger spotted tabby molly

DEPUTY

Houndstone - brown-and-white tom with blue eyes

OVERSEER

Stoatscratch - brown tabby tom with an eery gaze

MEDICINE CATS

Emberflame - tortoiseshell molly with green eyes

WARRIORS

Feathertuft - spotted grey tabby molly with wispy tufts of fur

Willowstem - silver-and-white tabby she-cat with one yellow and one blue eye

Lizardspring - dark ginger tom with bright green eyes

Deerskip - light brown torbie molly
Apprentice; Sneezepaw - black tom with a white tail tip

Batwatcher - jet-black tabby molly
Apprentice; Vixenpaw - ginger tabby molly

Beetlewhisper - spotted dark grey tabby tom

Hickoryseed - light brown tabby molly

ELDERS

Jaggedwhisker - brown torbie molly with green eyes

Crowsong - black tom with blue eyes

Poppymask - bright ginger molly with blue eyes

Eagleclaw - dark brown-and-white tabby tom

SWIFTCLAN

LEADER

Vinestar - very pale grey molly with thin stripes

DEPUTY

Swampnose - dark brown tom with darker marks on his muzzle

MEDICINE CATS

Cypressleaf - pale brown tabby tom

WARRIORS

Turtlepelt - tortoiseshell molly with green eyes

Ashwhisker - dark grey molly

Sorrelfrost - pretty tortoiseshell molly with amber eyes

Sedgetail - brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Goldenflame - beautiful golden tabby molly

Goosepounce - pale grey tabby tom with dark green eyes

Berryblossom - pale golden molly

Tawnyflame - tall dilute tortoiseshell molly with amber eyes

ELDERS

Snakefang - ginger tom with green eyes

Fishpelt - dark brown tabby tom

Stemflake - pale tabby molly

Bristlehawk - grey molly with white spots and amber eyes

Palespirit - light blue-grey tom

BLAZECLAN

LEADER

Buzzardstar - brown-and-white tabby she-cat

DEPUTY

Amberlight - ginger-and-white molly with green eyes

MEDICINE CATS

Shadowpath - dark grey tabby molly with amber eyes
Apprentice; Honeypaw - light brown she-cat

WARRIORS

Shellskip - pretty brownish-grey molly
Apprentice; Briarpaw - brown tabby molly with a whitish-silver underbelly

Absent - all-white tom with intense amber eyes and a long scar down his cheek

Poplarleaf - silver tabby tom with amber eyes

Prickleburr - fluffy brown tom with blue eyes
Apprentice; Molepaw - dark brown tabby tom

Wildrunner - poofy-furred silver-and-white tabby tom

Heatherpool - brown-and-white molly

ELDERS

Brambletuft - dark yellow tabby tom

Mousetail - dark brown molly with a black tail

Aspenblaze - silver-and-white tabby molly

RUSHCLAN

LEADER

Wolfstar - dark grey tabby tom with unusually scruffy neck fur

DEPUTY

Ripplewater - broad-shouldered silver tabby molly

MEDICINE CAT

Rosefall - fluffy ginger molly with darker freckles

WARRIORS

Mudbreath - light brown tom with darker ears

Pikesplash - narrow-faced dappled brown tom

Sleekthistle - slender yellow tabby molly

Toadpounce - brown tom with black marking behind his eyes

Sootmask - dark grey molly with a darker "mask" marking

Troutslip - dark grey-and-white tom with amber eyes

Reedtuft - dark yellow tabby tom with amber eyes

Pebblestream - light grey molly with white speckles

QUEENS

Clancy - very slender bluish-grey molly with yellow eyes, mother of Mudbreath's kits (Riverkit, Webkit, Lilykit)

ELDERS

Cloudfall - grey-and-white tom

Minnowbrook - sleek silver tabby molly with amber eyes

Hollyspots - grey she-cat with black freckles

Smokesnout - black molly with a lighter muzzle

CATS OUTSIDE CLANS

Badger - tiny black-and-white tom with green eyes

Sister Shade - large, long-furred grey molly with amber eyes

Orchid - very pale brown molly with striking green eyes

Blink - bright yellow tabby tom with blue eyes

Ricochet - brown molly with dark ginger markings

Oasis - huge, greyish seal-point tabby tom with dark blue eyes

Nyx - slender grey molly with warm green eyes

Note: If the interactive Allegiance links at the start of this page don't work, you can either comment for the link or DM me-or check out my Ao3 page, where the story is better published for those on mobile!

Prologue

A brown tabby molly sat atop a grassy ridge. Thin patches of mist weaved around her body as the air carried them along, though she hardly seemed to notice them. Her eyes were trained on a distant forest, residing above a deep gorge. Even though the territory was far out of her reach, she could still hear the faint roar of a river at the bottom of the ravine, its waters higher and its currents feral from the thaws of newleaf.

Slowly, the she-cat's gaze traveled across the land before her. From the southern harsh forest above the cliff, to the eastern, barren territory. A faint hint of green littered the otherwise desolate patch of land, promising new growths for the seasons to come. To the west, the long grass of marshy moorland swayed in the wind, and the molly thought that the motions mimicked the dancing of spirits in the breeze. To the northeast, another river winded through a patch of a forest, it's tides mimicking those of the gorge to the south. Then, to the northwest, a much more thickly forested piece of land seemed to be in full bloom.

In the middle of the territory rested a massive tree, and hidden in its leaves was a sneaky twinkle that caught the eye of the brown tabby. She tilted her head and leaned forward, trying—and failing—to get a closer look. Far beyond the territories, the sun began to set faster than she had ever seen. It slowed down as crimson rays of light were cast over not only the forest, but the ridge where the brown tabby sat. The final clouds overhead split apart to highlight her with a much more intense light.

At least, she thought it was aimed at her. When she realized she wasn't sitting under the warm embrace of the sunset, she turned to see what exactly *was* captured by its light. Next to her was a patch of silver ragwort, its fuzzy leaves stained red by the light that shone upon it.

No sooner than she saw it, the breeze began to pick up until it had reached torrential speeds. The she-cat unsheathed her claws

and dug them into the soil beneath her, as if she were holding on for dear life. Masses of clouds rolled across the sky, blotting out the blood-red sheen that the sunset had cast over everything. The plant, however, remained stained red, its leaves eerily still in the stinging winds that weaved around the she-cat.

Almost as soon as it had started, the wind ceased without warning. Even the clouds high above had screeched to a halt, though the loomed threateningly overhead.

"A great storm, given countless seasons to fester, will soon wreak havoc on the Clans."

The tone of a thousand voices rang out, nearly deafening the molly. Far on the horizon, black storm clouds swirled together and crept menacingly across the sky. They snuffed out every light source, sending a dark shadow across all land in sight—but the ragwort remained red. Just when the brown-furred she-cat thought she would suffocate from the darkness, thunder rattled the earth and lightning tore a path across the sky. As if on cue, the clouds released a burst of rain. The droplets fell so hard that they bounced back off the ground by a hair, creating a sheen of mist along the earth.

The brown tabby squinted through the blinding, pouring rain, and stiffened when she saw that the rain was washing away the vermillion shades that stained the silver ragwort. A few final gusts of wind shoved the molly around before receding, followed closely by the rain, and then the dark clouds. The sun peeked out from the clouds—higher in the sky now, with glorious golden rays bursting from it. A few of these rays were directed to the soaking she-cat and the plant next to her, which she noticed glittered in the new light.

She took a few deep breaths as she tried to ground herself. Slowly, she took a step backwards to sit down—a step too far, she realized, as she slipped over the ledge of the ridge she had chosen and plummeted into nothingness.

With a start, she found herself awake in front of a pool that glittered with starlight. Around her sat four other cats, murmuring with each other cheerfully. Thin wisps of mist wrapped themselves

around her as if to comfort her, while a small series of waterfalls rumbled reassuringly. Slowly, the molly sat up and looked around. As she did so, she realized that she'd been digging her claws into the edges of the pool, and that her companions were watching her worriedly.

"Rowanspots, are you okay?" asked a very dark grey molly.

"Yeah, you don't look too well," a fluffy ginger she-cat added, her gaze flitting across the brown tabby's form.

"What did you see?" a pale brown tom whispered urgently, his eyes wide as he waited for a response.

The brown tabby she-cat shook her head in an attempt to clear it. An unsettling sensation had taken hold of her, and she had to force air into her lungs with every breath. When she finally managed a response, her voice was raspy and strained.

"I . . . I think I just received a prophecy."

Chapter One

Silverkit wriggled excitedly as she sat next to Cricketkit, her brown tabby denmate. In front of them was Stormkit, standing tall on a boulder that rested up against the woven bramble wall outside the nursery. He waved his tail proudly and reared back to let out a proud mewl.

"I, Stormstar, name you Silvershadow and Cricketjump of NightClan!" he yowled, squinting down at Silverkit and their denmate.

"Cricketjump!" Silverkit cheered Cricketkit's pretend name and bounced around happily. The brown tabby joined her quickly and they started dancing around, scuffing dust up with their movements. Stormkit leaped down from the boulder to join them, nearly barreling into the two kits as he stumbled over his own paws.

Silverkit slowed down when a flash of golden fur caught her eye. *Oh, great,* she thought sourly when she saw that Waspkit was approaching them. *Waspkit is coming to grace us with his attitude.* Just as she suspected, Waspkit let out a scoff as he approached the three kits.

"Come *on,* Cricketkit!" he groaned with a twitch of his tail. "We have to get ready for our apprentice ceremony, you can't keep playing these games like a little kit!"

Out of the corner of her eye, Silverkit saw Stormkit reel backwards, as if he took offense to their denmate's harsh words. Silverkit rolled her eyes at Waspkit when Cricketkit reluctantly padded away. *He's always so serious!*

"Sorry, guys," Cricketkit mewed apologetically. "I'll see you after the ceremony!"

"Fine!" Silverkit sighed reluctantly. "Come on, Stormkit! Let's

race to the root above the medicine den!"

She took off before Stormkit could respond, laughing when she heard his paws scrape against the clearing floor as he scrambled to catch up. Once he set a pace, he seemed to get caught up with ease, and Silverkit started straining to stay ahead of him. They both scrambled up the large root that formed the roof of the medicine den, reaching the top at the same time.

"I beat you!" Stormkit exclaimed happily, clinging onto the bark of the root with his claws.

"No way!" Silverkit mewed indignantly, holding onto the root twice as tightly as her brother. "I got here first!"

"Fine, we tied," her brother gave a huff of exasperation before flicking his tail toward the leader's den — or rather, the two large boulders that were wedged against the tree behind it. "We'll race again — this time, to the top of the leader's den!"

Silverkit turned around and peered up at the top of the looming boulders. It seemed so far away, and she thought the climb would be far too steep for her. Of course, she didn't let Stormkit know how she felt. She turned to the dark grey tom and gave him a fierce glance, digging her claws into the root beneath her once more.

"Okay, let's go!" Silverkit nodded decidedly before launching herself onto the base of the stone.

Beside her, Stormkit scrabbled helplessly against the smooth surface for a few heartbeats before finding his footing and rocketing to the top of the boulder. Silverkit kept struggling desperately to find a foothold as she claws her way up the formation. Once she neared the top, she started to feel herself tipping backwards. *Oh no, I'm falling!* In an attempt to find stable footing she lashed at the stone, and as a result she lost what little hold she had and began to fall. As soon as she started sprawling into the air, Silverkit felt teeth snatch at her scruff and hold her securely.

"Woah, there!" spoke a familiar, friendly voice. Silverkit found herself perking up as she easily recognized the sound, scrambling

from their grasp to properly greet the cat who had rescued her.

"Uncle Thistlestar!" Stormkit bellowed before she could say anything, barreling down from the boulder and tackling Silverkit's savior. Silverkit copied his motions as Thistlestar pretended to rock backwards under the force of their pounces, letting out a warm laugh.

"What were you two doing up there?" the white tom queried after a few moments. "You could have gotten hurt, you know."

"As if!" Silverkit retorted quickly, the fear of her near-fall now gone.

"Yeah, we wouldn't get hurt!" Stormkit chimed in, looking up at their uncle. "We're mighty warriors!"

"Even *mighty warriors* get hurt sometimes," Thistlestar reminded them gently, nudging them both with a paw. "Where's your mother at? It's nearly time for Cricketkit and Waspkit's ceremony, and you two shouldn't be climbing on top of the dens." Silverkit opened her mouth to say that their mother, Mintwillow, was resting in the nursery when she spotted her dark silver pelt approaching quickly.

"I'm right here," Mintwillow mewed crossly before fixing the kits with a harsh gaze. "Come on, you two. Let Thistlestar continue his preparations — StarClan knows he doesn't need to be watching out for you, too."

Silverkit and Stormkit groaned in harmonic disappointment and followed their mother back to the patch of sand outside the nursery. Once she vanished into their den once again, Silverkit turned to her brother, feeling mischievous.

"Let's play mossball! I bet Rowanspots has some extra moss in her den!" she whispered excitedly, giving Stormkit a nudge.

"Okay, but you have to get the moss!" Stormkit mewed and glanced at the medicine den. "Last time I went, I messed up her herb bundles, and Rowanspots scolded me for a moon!"

"Whatever, you big scaredy-mouse!" Silverkit rolled her eyes and

trotted off toward the medicine cat's den. Luckily for her, Rowanspots was nowhere to be seen; the ginger-spotted brown tabby was likely out collecting herbs.

Silverkit quickly made her way to Rowanspots' collection of moss, sticking to the edges of the den to avoid making the same mistake as Stormkit. After grabbing a mouthful of the soft, green material, she hurried out of the den and started to bound over to her brother.

"Here," she mewed as she spat it out and rolled it into a ball. Before Stormkit could grab it, Silverkit hooked her claw into it and flung it at him.

"Hey!"

She ignored the dark grey kit's protests as she laughed and bounded away from him. Silverkit rounded the stone that they'd once perched on as they pretended to be mighty warriors, and when she peeked back over the top she saw the moss ball flying directly towards her at speeds faster than she could react.

Just as she thought it would hit her in the face, a brown paw reached out and barely caught the ball with its claws. Silverkit flinched at the new appearance and looked up to see Cricketkit perched on the stone.

"Do you guys mind if I play?" he mewed hopefully with a sideways glance toward the nursery.

"Sure!" Silverkit responded cheerily as she hopped up onto the rock. With a wary glance around, she noted that Waspkit was nowhere to be seen, so she snatched the moss ball from Cricketkit and tossed it to Stormkit.

The three kits continued to throw the ball of moss back and forth, none of them noticing that they gradually grew closer to the warriors' den with their game. Eventually, Stormkit stood readily in front of the entrance to the den, unaware of the fact that a shadow was emerging from it. Silverkit threw the ball high into the air and realized far too late that it would soar over Stormkit's paws, hitting

the nearby warrior — who she'd realized was Dawnstrike, a grouchy, cream-furred molly — right on the shoulder.

Dawnstrike let out a surprised hiss as the mossy ball bounced off of her and rolled pathetically back towards the nursery. Within an instant she had rounded on the three kits, her green eyes bright with an anger that frightened Silverkit. She, along with her brother and Cricketkit, turned to race away from the cross warrior only to freeze as Dawnstrike suddenly towered over them threateningly.

"You two are two moons away from being apprentices, it's time to stop this silly nonsense!" Dawnstrike spat furiously. "What would Thistlestar say? And Cricketkit, your apprentice ceremony is today!" Her exasperated muttering didn't stop there, but it quickly became indistinguishable to the young cats.

"Sorry, Dawnstrike," Silverkit mewed tentatively. Next to her, Stormkit said nothing and stomped away with defiance shining in his jade green eyes. Silverkit followed him quickly with Cricketkit at her heels.

"I don't know why she's always so cranky!" Stormkit swiped at the moss ball once they reached the nursery, scattering it towards Silverkit. She flinched at the suddenness of it, and he quickly grew apologetic. "Sorry, Silv, I didn't realize you were so close."

Cricketkit flicked his tail thoughtfully when neither of them spoke again. "My dad says that she wasn't always cranky like this. She's never opened up to anyone about it, either." As he spoke, the trio padded into the nursery, though Silverkit didn't see Waspkit or either of their mothers nearby, though their scents were fresh.

"She's *probably* mad 'cause she found out her father was a dirty rogue," Waspkit appeared around a bend in the den's wall, his chin and tail held high. Silverkit shot an uneasy glance toward Stormkit at the comment and saw that he looked equally uncomfortable by their denmate's words.

"Waspkit, you know better!" Suddenly, Mintwillow loomed over them. Each of the kits jumped at her sudden presence, spinning to face her sheepishly. "Your mother's parents were rogues — and our

medicine cat! You should consider yourself lucky that neither of them were here for that."

Silverkit watched as Waspkit flinched in surprise, then seemed to notice her and Stormkit again. Guilt flashed over his expression and he bowed his head, mewing, "Sorry, Stormkit and Silverkit. I didn't mean anything by it—"

"It's fine!" Silverkit responded quickly when she saw Stormkit open his mouth for an angry retort. "Besides, we don't even know if our dad was a rogue or not. It's no big deal."

Waspkit looked uncertain for a few moments before squeezing past them and heading toward the den entrance. Beside Silverkit, Cricketkit was scowling at his brother as he crossed the den, and he kept the sour expression until the golden tom was out of sight. Then, he turned an apologetic gaze toward Silverkit and Stormkit.

"I'm sorry, you guys," he murmured softly. "I don't know why he'd say something like that."

"It's whatever," Stormkit muttered quietly, not meeting Cricketkit's or Silverkit's gazes. "Don't you gotta prepare for your ceremony?"

"Yeah, seriously!" Silverkit chimed in. "You should go get ready! We'll be cheering for you from the sidelines."

Cricketkit stammered out a quick *'thank you'* before hurrying out of the nursery. Behind the two remaining kits, Mintwillow let out a soft chuckle, reminding them of her presence, and that she had watched the entire exchange.

"I'm proud to call you two my kits." The dark silver-and-white queen leaned down to give each of their foreheads a quick, affectionate lick before straightening out. "Come on, let's go watch the ceremony."

She led the two kits out of the nursery quietly and climbed onto the stone just outside, basking in the sun that warmed its surface. Silverkit sat a few tail-lengths away with Stormkit and watched

quietly as cats seemed to bustle about with preparations. The sound of something faint tickled her eardrums, and when she looked around she saw Thistlestar whispering to Mistypool, a deep grey molly that Silverkit knew as her grandmother.

"Mother, are you certain?" Thistlestar whispered quickly as Silverkit crept closer to them. "Don't forget, you and Daisynose can retire whenever you want now — I can always take on another apprentice, too."

"I'll know when I'm ready to retire," Mistypool snapped back, startling Silverkit. "I'm far from being ready to retire — StarClan, I'm not even four seasons older than Wrenfeather!"

"Maybe not, but my deputy's not stressing about an apprentice, either," Thistlestar responded coolly with a flick of his tail.

"Oh, I'm sure he will be soon." Mistypool let out a soft laugh and sent her gaze toward Silverkit. The action sent Thistlestar's attention to her, and Silverkit felt her ears heat up with the embarrassment of being caught listening to them.

The argument quickly ceased, but as Thistlestar padded off she swore she heard him mutter something about keeping an eye on the senior warrior. As soon as they were gone, Silverkit turned to ask Stormkit if he knew what Mistypool had meant. When she was met by a blank space where Stormkit had once sat, she looked around and saw that he had snuck toward the edges of the forming crowd.

Stormkit had seemingly found a place next to Rookpaw, Icepaw, and Falconpaw, and felt herself grow jealous as she watched him chat easily with the older apprentices. *I wanna be friends with them, too,* she thought and considered joining her brother. When Thistlestar leaped onto the boulder above his den, and then onto a nearby overhanging root, she settled on her spot near Mintwillow.

"I'd call a Clan meeting, but it seems like you're all here already," Thistlestar called out at first as his gaze swept over the cats below him. His amber eyes, softened by his amusement, rested on the two eldest kits as he spoke their names. "Cricketkit, Waspkit, step forward."

Silverkit leaned forward and watched her denmates pad to the front of the crowd. Waspkit's body was rigid, but even from across the camp she could see excitement swimming in his green gaze. Beside him, Cricketkit trembled nervously as he stared up at their leader. *I bet it's so nerve-wracking! Especially with everyone watching them,* Silverkit thought.

"Cricketkit, you've reached the age of six moons, and now it is time for you to start your apprenticeship. From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you'll be known as Cricketpaw. Dovesong trained Sandfoot well, and I trust that she will pass down all she knows to you, as well." Thistlestar paused before turning to the warrior he named. "Dovesong, you're ready to take on another apprentice. You received excellent training from Snailbelly, and you've shown yourself to be patient and loyal. You will mentor Cricketpaw until he's ready to receive his warrior name, and I expect you to turn him into a great warrior."

Dovesong, a beautiful grey molly, padded forward to meet Cricketpaw. Her eyes glittered with amusement as she leaned forward to touch her nose to the brown tabby tom's, and Silverkit perked her ears when she saw the warrior murmur something to the new apprentice.

"Waspkit, you've also reached the age of six moons, and therefore you must begin your training alongside Cricketpaw. From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you'll be known as Wasppaw. Mistypool has trained many warriors before you, and I have faith that she will teach you everything she knows." Thistlestar hesitated before turning to the senior warrior and addressing her. "Mistypool, you received wonderful training from Warblerwing, and you've proven yourself to be driven and hard-working. You'll take Wasppaw under your wing, and I trust that you'll teach him everything you've learned over the seasons."

The clearing erupted into cheers for the new apprentices. Silverkit stood up on her hindlegs to cheer their names, and saw that, for once, Wasppaw had let go of his serious attitude. While he danced not-so-subtly on his paws, Cricketpaw trembled from his excitement. Slowly, the celebrations died down, and Silverkit started trotting forward to congratulate them.

Suddenly, Icepaw cut in front of her path, and Silverkit hesitated to watch the grey molly make her way to the front of the crowd.

"U-Um, I actually have something to say," she called out, her tail quivering nervously as she addressed Thistlestar. Silverkit stopped dead in her tracks, enthralled by whatever Icepaw had to say — she'd never seen anyone speak up unannounced before.

"What is it, Icepaw?" Thistlestar asked, stopping halfway on his descent from his perch. The confusion in his amber eyes only confirmed that this wasn't a planned announcement, which further drew Silverkit's curiosity.

"I'd like to become a medicine cat apprentice," Icepaw mewed, looking down at her paws sheepishly. "I talked to Rowanspots about it, and we decided it would suit me better."

"What are you talking about?" Dawnstrike shoved past Silverkit as if she didn't even see the young cat, stopping when she neared her apprentice. "Your training was going so well!"

"No, it wasn't!" Icepaw snapped quickly, though it didn't sound angry to Silverkit — it sounded pained and apologetic. "I'm no good at hunting, and I can't even beat my own littermates when we train!"

"Icepaw, are you sure about this?" Cindertalon, a dark grey tom, spoke up. Silverkit peered around Dawnstrike and saw that the younger warrior looked concerned, yet proud, and remembered that he was her father — that he, Icepaw, Rookpaw, and Falconpaw had come to the Clan as rogues before Silverpaw could form proper memories.

"Yes, I'm sure." The clarity in Icepaw's voice echoed through the cats.

"This is nonsense!" Dawnstrike insisted, unsheathing her claws and digging them into the pine needle-laden earth beneath them. "Icepaw, come on, your warrior assessment is so close! Only a couple more moons, and you'd be set!" Silverkit slowly started backing away from the distressed warrior and saw that Thistlestar

had fully descended from his perch and was approaching the two cats cautiously.

"Dawnstrike, calm yourself—"

"Don't tell me to calm down, Thistlestar." Dawnstrike spat at their leader with newfound venom to her tone. Silverkit flinched, started by the ferocity of her voice, and shuddered as a dead silence fell over the clearing. Even her uncle looked taken aback by the words, and when Dawnstrike realized what she'd said, she grew visibly embarrassed.

"I don't *want* to be a warrior," Icepaw whispered, looking away from Dawnstrike.

"Fine," Dawnstrike responded, her voice even quieter than the timid apprentice's. Without another word, the cream-furred molly turned and padded toward the camp entrance. Sandfoot, the pale orange tabby that was her brother, rushed past Silverkit to follow her but was stopped by Dovesong.

"Give her some space," the pretty warrior mewed softly. Sandfoot begrudgingly agreed and joined a few other warriors as the group dispersed. Silverkit finally turned away from the scene, bumping into Stormkit as she did so.

"That was intense!" Stormkit breathed out to her. His green eyes glittered with anticipation as he peeked around Silverkit and eyed the camp entrance.

"I know!" Silverkit replied quietly. "I've *never* seen anyone snap at Thistlestar like that."

"Maybe we should follow her," Stormkit mewed thoughtfully, his eyes not once leaving the camp entrance.

"What? No!" Silverkit found herself bristling at the thought of leaving the camp. "We'd get into so much trouble!"

"Only if we get caught." When she saw that her brother had a dangerously mischievous glint in his eyes, her stomach turned with anxiety.

"Stormpaw, we could have our apprentice ceremonies delayed." She fixed her brother with a serious look, and he finally caved.

"Ugh, fine!" he groaned reluctantly. "You're no fun sometimes, Silverkit."

Silverkit let out a huff and tackled Stormkit playfully. "And you're just a troublemaker!"

"A troublemaker that'll turn into a great leader!" Stormkit retorted with a burst of laughter. He swiped back at Silverkit, cuffing her ears gently a few times.

"Is that a challenge?" Thistlestar's warm voice startled the kits apart, and he laughed when they scrambled to their paws. "You'll have to work hard to earn a chance at deputyship, Stormkit." With one paw, the white tom reached out to ruffle Stormkit's fur. Silverkit burst into a loud purr as she watched them.

"It'll be easy when he has you to look up to!" Silverkit rushed forward to tackle him, but found herself struggling against his outstretched paw.

"I sure hope so," Thistlestar murmured affectionately before rising to his paws. "I'd love to play, little ones, but I've got to have a word with Dawnstrike. Keep each other out of trouble while I'm gone."

With that, Thistlestar padded out of the camp. Silverkit watched as his wispy-furred tail vanished into the camp entrance before shooting Stormkit a skeptical glance. *That was certainly odd,* she thought to herself, though she didn't voice it in fear of Stormkit urging her to sneak out again. *I wonder what's going on with Thistlestar and Dawnstrike.*

Chapter Two

Two moons had passed since Cricketpaw and Wasppaw became apprentices. Stormkit had grown painfully impatient alongside Silverkit. They yearned to go to the Gathering just like the older cats did and meet the new apprentices of other Clans. Cricketpaw had told them that the newest apprentices, Lilypaw and Webpaw of RushClan, were a bit odd, but he poked fun at the fact that Wasppaw grew flustered around the one named Lilypaw.

Now Stormkit sat wedged in a small hole in the elders' den, listening to the senior Clan members gossip about the happenings in camp. His own apprentice ceremony was scheduled in a few sunrises, and he knew this was as good a time as any to get entertainment before he started his training and the inevitable, dreaded elder duties.

"Letting another rogue become medicine cat is a bad idea," Vinecrawl, a sandy-yellow molly grumbled. A grunt of agreement came from someone Stormkit couldn't see, but he thought it was Snailbelly, Vinecrawl's littermate.

"You two forget about your own lineage." Stormkit peered through a few brambles to watch Warblerwing shake his head, the curly tufts of fur on his cheeks bouncing with the action. Next to him sat Lynxtail, her unusually short tail twitching with annoyance.

"Sandstripe and Firthistle were both Clan cats," Vinecrawl retorted defensively. "Being half-Clan is not the same as being a rogue, and it was more acceptable after the Great War, too. Maybe if they'd been brought as newborns, it would be different—"

"Newtsplash and Rowanspots *were* brought as newborns," Lynxtail reminded the younger elder coolly, her voice raspy with age.

"—but Icepaw and her littermates were old enough to be apprenticed when Cindertalon brought them here. How could a

grown rogue develop the connection to StarClan that medicine cats need?" Vinecrawl finished her remark by stomping out of Stormkit's line of sight.

Stormkit resisted the urge to jump into the den and tell the elders off. He narrowed his eyes as their words started to plant seeds of doubt within him. *What if* our *dad is a rogue? Would that make our Clanmates doubt Silverkit and me, too? Maybe* that's *why Dawnstrike is so mad all the time.* He started to feel sympathetic toward the grumpy warrior as he listened to the elders bicker more.

"You have no room to talk, Vinecrawl," Lynxtail growled at her. "Sandfoot and Dawnstrike received harsh criticism long after everyone found out about their father — your own kits, for StarClan's sake, and look what it did to poor Dawnstrike! Yet here you are, repeating the same words used against them for moons."

"That's different!"

Stormkit frowned as Vinecrawl grew more defensive. *It's not different at all!* he thought sourly, even more tempted to leap into the den and confront them.

"I raised them here from the start!" The elder continued when nobody else spoke.

"Lynxtail has a point, Vinecrawl," Snailbelly spoke up reluctantly, padding into Stormkit's sight. His pale brown fur was tangled, just like Warblerwing's, though his was tangled in a way that looked as if he hadn't groomed himself recently.

"It's no different at all." Stormkit breathed out a sigh of relief when Warblerwing voiced his own thoughts. "Icepaw will be a fine medicine cat to us, especially if Rowanspots agrees. *She* was found abandoned by rogues when she was only a kit, and she receives visions and signs just fine!"

Before the argument could continue, Stormkit backed out of his hiding spot, not wanting to let the elders further irritate him. As he was padding away from the den, he bumped into Silverkit, who didn't seem to pick up on his irritation.

"Hi Stormkit!" she chirped cheerily. "Are you ready for our apprentice ceremony? I can't believe it's only a few sunrises away!"

The reminder immediately cheered Stormkit up, and he nodded quickly. "Yeah! I wonder who our mentors will be, though."

Silverkit glanced around as if she was about to tell her brother a big secret. "I bet one of us will be assigned to Wrenfeather! I overheard Thistlestar and Mistypool talking a while ago, and it sounded like they're planning on it!"

"Mentored by the deputy?" Stormkit responded, quickly becoming enamored by the idea. "That's awesome! Which of us will it be?"

"I hope it's you," Silverkit mewed with a twitch of her whiskers. "I know you wanna be an awesome leader someday, so being mentored by the deputy would be great!"

Behind Silverkit, Stormkit saw Dawnstrike crossing the clearing. "What if they change their minds and choose Dawnstrike instead? She's so mean . . . ."

"Maybe she's just misunderstood." Silverkit offered a weak shrug, though Stormkit could see that she didn't like the idea, either. "She seemed really hurt by Icepaw's decision to become a medicine cat, on top of whatever is going on between her and Thistlestar."

"Dawnstrike and uncle Thistlestar? What do you mean?" Stormkit rocked backwards and fixed his gaze on the short-tempered warrior again. He hadn't thought that something was happening between the two cats.

"You saw how she snapped at him!" Silverkit retorted lightheartedly. "There's gotta be something going on there — Thistlestar hardly even responded to what she said!"

"I guess you have a point," Stormkit mewed slowly as he thought about it. *Uncle Thistlestar* did *go out after her, too,* he reminded himself.

"Kits, come on!" Mintwillow poked her head out of the nursery

and called to them. "It's time to get ready for your ceremony!"

"What? Our ceremony isn't today," Stormkit responded in disbelief while Silverkit immediately started bouncing around excitedly.

"Thistlestar decided to surprise you both. Come on, now!" Their mother vanished back into the nursery once she saw her kits scampering toward her. Or, rather, Silverkit was scampering excitedly while Stormkit took on a slower pace.

Inside the nursery, Mintwillow quickly started grooming the both of them. Stormkit let out a few half-hearted grumbles as she licked the top of his head roughly, trying not to show just how much the action comforted him. Beside him, Silverkit purred loudly, her body nearly vibrating from her visible excitement. Stormkit let out a soft laugh as he watched her, his sister's cheeriness making him feel a bit more at ease.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather before the Highroot!" Thistlestar's voice echoed from the clearing. Mintwillow gave them both a final, firm lick on their foreheads before sending them out into the clearing.

Once in the main clearing, Stormkit saw that a large crowd had already formed in front of Thistlestar's perch and quickly grew nervous. He took a few steps forward and noticed that Silverkit fell behind a few paces. When Stormkit glanced back at her, he realized that she looked hesitant for once, and he fell back to give her an encouraging nudge. She seemed grateful for his support and together they padded forward until they stood near the front of the crowd.

"Stormkit and Silverkit, step forward." Thistlestar's voice rang out and drove the siblings forward. "Stormkit, you've reached the age of six moons, and thus it is time for you to start your apprenticeship. From this day on, until you earn your warrior name, you'll be known as Stormpaw. Your mentor will be Wrenfeather, and I know that he will pass down everything he knows to you. Wrenfeather, you're the best deputy a cat could have, and you taught Ferrettail well. I expect you to teach Stormpaw just

as well."

Stormpaw felt his excitement well up as he padded forward to meet Wrenfeather. He touched his nose to the golden-brown tom, hoping that the deputy couldn't see his childish exhilaration. Then, he looked back at Silverkit and felt anticipation replace his excitement. *I hope she doesn't get Dawnstrike*, he worried. *She'd be way too hard on her!*

"Silverkit, you too have reached the age of apprenticeship, and it is time to take on your apprentice name. From this day on, until you earn your warrior name, you'll be known as Silverpaw. Your mentor will be Cindertalon." Thistlestar paused as the dark grey warrior padded forward to meet the excited Silverpaw. "Cindertalon, you're more than ready for your first apprentice. You received excellent training from Mistypool, and you've shown yourself to be clever and strategic. I trust that you will teach Silverpaw everything you know."

As Stormpaw watched his sister greet her mentor, he began to feel conflicted about the result. *Why would he assign one of us to an ex-rogue? Wouldn't the others start rumors, just like they have with Icepaw and Dawnstrike?* Near the back of the crowd, Stormpaw noticed the cream-furred warrior sulking angrily. *So many cats seem to have something against rogues, and Cindertalon and all of his kits were rogues, but they seem so nice . . . I won't let anyone talk about* us *like that if our father is a rogue! We'll be the best warriors NightClan has ever seen!* Stormpaw stood tall as he felt his thoughts fill him with certainty and warmth.

"Stormpaw! Silverpaw!"

Around them, a chorus of cheers from their Clanmates filled the air and Stormpaw puffed his chest out proudly. Wrenfeather gestured to him, and as he followed the deputy to a more secluded spot Cindertalon joined them with Silverpaw.

"Stormpaw, I still have to finish assigning duties for the day," Wrenfeather mewed regretfully as he sat down. "Go and greet your new denmates while I finish, and after I'm done I'll come give you your first assignment."

"Go on with him, Silverpaw," Cindertalon nodded to the silver-point molly. "I've got a little while before my first patrol, so I'll come fetch you with Wrenfeather for your duties."

Stormpaw nodded obediently and rushed off toward the apprentices' den — their new den — with Silverpaw close on his heels. Outside sat Cricketpaw and Wasppaw, the former happy to see their old denmates. Wasppaw, on the other hand, looked just as serious as always. For the time being, Rookpaw and Falconpaw were nowhere to be seen, and Stormpaw assumed Icepaw was in the medicine den with Rowanspots.

"Your first day as apprentices will be the worst," Wasppaw warned them before they could utter a greeting.

"Why?" Stormpaw mewed and eyed the golden tom, feeling a bit skeptical of his warning.

"You'll be stuck cleaning out the elders' bedding or checking them for ticks." Wasppaw flicked his tail matter-of-factly as he watched the two new apprentices.

Stormpaw shot a glance at Silverpaw, not sure if he believed what Wasppaw said. Regardless, they both grimaced at the idea of performing elder duties. Before they had a chance to respond, however, Stormpaw saw that Wrenfeather and Cindertalon were already approaching.

"Stormpaw," Wrenfeather called as he padded up. "Rowanspots just requested some help gathering cobwebs while she's training Icepaw. I've still got a few duties to sort out, so I probably won't have time for training today."

Stormpaw let out a crestfallen sigh. "Rowanspots *hates* me, though!"

"I'm sure that's not true. Look, I'll be able to show you the territory tomorrow, but you have to be good for Rowanspots." Wrenfeather took on a scolding tone, but Stormpaw could see amusement in his green eyes. *Wasppaw sure takes after him in looks, but he definitely doesn't get his attitude from Wrenfeather!* Stormpaw

thought to himself when he compared the welcoming deputy to his short-tempered son.

He wouldn't admit it, but Stormpaw perked up at the idea of exploring the territory and cast his gaze to his sister. Silverpaw was watching Cindertalon closely, impatiently waiting for her own orders. Her dark grey mentor eyed her before he spoke, his tone formal.

"Check on the elders to see if they need anything," Cindertalon mewed. "Give them fresh bedding, check them for ticks and fleas, whatever they ask for. Once you're finished, you can have the day off, and I'll show you the territory with Wrenfeather and Stormpaw tomorrow."

Silverpaw visibly deflated as Cindertalon nodded to the other apprentices and padded away to join a forming patrol. Wrenfeather returned to the cluster of cats who awaited instructions, quickly falling into his position.

"Told you," Wasppaw said, sticking his nose up. "Wrenfeather barely even had time for *us* when we were in the nursery, I doubt he'd have much time for you, Stormpaw."

Beside Stormpaw, Silverpaw let out a frustrated groan and he nudged her reassuringly. "Hey, hopefully the elders won't ask much of you!"

"They're usually pretty easy on us," Cricketpaw spoke up, looking apologetic. "I don't see why that'd change for you two. Good luck!"

At their encouraging words, Silverpaw seemed to perk up, and the two siblings went their separate ways. Stormpaw padded reluctantly toward the medicine den, pausing once he reached it to eye the curtain of lichen that was in his way. He recalled how harshly he'd been scolded last time he entered the den and took a deep breath before pushing his way into the den.

Inside the medicine den, Rowanspots sat with Icepaw, her voice echoing faintly as she ordered her to name the herbs that were

lined up at their paws. When she noticed Stormpaw, the brown tabby seemed to tense up, and turned her ginger-spotted muzzle to face him only barely.

"Wrenfeather said you needed help gathering cobwebs?" Stormpaw mewed awkwardly when the medicine cat said nothing.

"Ah . . . ." Rowanspots responded slowly, her gaze fixed on Stormpaw. "Yes, I *did* ask for that. My supply is low, but I'm a little bit preoccupied with Icepaw. There's a hollow tree trunk just outside of the camp entrance, and it usually has plenty of fresh cobwebs inside. Can you fetch some for me?"

"Sure!" Stormpaw responded briskly before bounding back out of the cave. He figured her odd behavior was simply due to his history of scattering her bundles of herbs, and didn't give it a second thought — he'd be wary of someone like himself, too. His paws prickled with excitement at the idea of leaving camp, even if it was only for a few moments. Anticipation sparked throughout his coat as he took his first step out of the camp and looked around.

From the outside, the wall of brambles surrounding the giant oak tree almost made the camp look like a stronghold. He could see the hollow tree trunk that Rowanspots mentioned a few short bounds away, so he rushed to it and reached his paw inside of it. After swiping his paw around to gather as much of the cobwebs as possible, he retracted his paw and held it off of the forest floor.

Stormpaw swiftly padded back into the camp on only three legs. Inside, he saw his mother, Mintwillow, talking to Ferrettail, a brown-and-white tom, and Newtsplash, the brown torbie mother of Cricketpaw and Wasppaw. While the tom looked disinterested in their conversation, Newtsplash seemed enthralled by whatever Stormpaw's mother was saying.

"Hi, mother!" Stormpaw called out cheerily as he crossed the clearing. Mintwillow didn't respond to his call — not even a twitch of an ear in acknowledgement as she continued her conversation. *She must have not heard me,* he thought to himself with a shrug as he entered the medicine den.

Once inside, he saw that Rowanspots hadn't moved from where she instructed Icepaw. The grey-furred apprentice hunched over the bundles of herbs in front of her with her eyebrows furrowed, as if she were concentrating hard on the lesson.

"I brought the cobwebs, Rowanspots," Stormpaw announced softly, not wanting to distract Icepaw.

"Alright, just hang it on that smaller root that's hooking down from above," Rowanspots called without looking over. She flicked her tail in the direction of the root — luckily for Stormpaw, it wasn't far from the entrance of the den, so he didn't have to worry about scattering Rowanspots' work *again*.

As Stormpaw padded to the root, staying close to the very edges of the den, he heard someone else push past the curtain behind him. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Rookpaw, who looked disappointed when he saw that his sister was still busy with her lessons.

While Stormpaw continued padding to the root with his cobweb-covered paw raised, Rookpaw started to shadow him quietly. "That was rough, buddy," he mewed softly.

"What was?" Stormpaw responded, feeling confused as he reached up to catch the cobwebs on the root.

"The way Mintwillow ignored you like that!" The way Rookpaw said it made Stormpaw feel like it should have been obvious.

"Oh . . . I thought maybe she just didnt hear me," the grey tom murmured softly, flicking his ears as he finished getting all of the webs off his paw.

"Nope," Rookpaw shrugged and watched Stormpaw as he dropped back down to all fours. "She was definitely ignoring you."

"Why would she do that . . . ?" Stormpaw fixed Rookpaw with a skeptical gaze. *He's probably just saying that to freak me out,* he told himself, though he'd always heard that Rookpaw was the more serious of Cindertalon's three kits.

"Stormpaw, if you're finished, please leave," Rowanspots called, irritation sneaking its way into her tone. "You too, Rookpaw. Icepaw needs to concentrate before we leave for Starfalls."

Stormpaw quickly shut his mouth and retreated from the den. He could sense Rookpaw close on his tail, and hoped the older apprentice wouldn't bring up the idea of his mother ignoring him again. Luckily, the black-furred cat seemed to pick up on his wishes.

"You know," Rookpaw spoke up, tilting his head, "if you don't have anything else to do, I could show you a few hunting stances that Sandfoot taught me. That way, you can impress Wrenfeather when he starts your lessons."

"Woah, really?" Stormpaw felt his spirit lift at the idea of impressing his mentor.

Rookpaw nodded eagerly in response. "Of course, I don't really have anything else to do right now."

Stormpaw grew excited as Rookpaw led him to a patch of grass outside of the apprentices' den. Pine needles were often swept away from this spot, which was a nice contrast to how the earth just outside of the den was covered with a thick layer of russet-colored needles.

When Rookpaw dropped into a seemingly-expert hunting crouch, Stormpaw sat and watched him intently. He noted how the older apprentice kept his muscles taut the entire time, as if always prepared to leap onto unsuspecting prey. He became so engrossed in the demonstration that he hardly heard his sister approach them.

"Hi Rookpaw!" Silverpaw chirped happily, startling Stormpaw. "Stormpaw, did you finish your assignment? The elders hardly had me do anything — just like Cricketpaw said!"

"Yeah, Rowanspots didn't need much help," Stormpaw mewed, noticing a hint of admiration in his sister's tone when she mentioned their denmate. "Rookpaw said he'd show me some of the hunting moves he's learned so far."

"No way! Really?" Silverpaw gasped and turned her blue gaze to Rookpaw, who had paused his demonstration. "That's so cool!" Stormpaw nodded quickly, his feelings matching hers.

"You can watch, too, Silverpaw," Rookpaw offered kind-heartedly as he prepared his stance again.

"Sure!" Silverpaw blurted out before silencing herself and settling next to Stormpaw. Stormpaw held his breath in anticipation as he watched Rookpaw's next demonstration. He held his body close to the earth, yet just high enough so that his fur and belly hovered over the smallest blades of grass. His tail stuck out behind him as he started gliding forward smoothly.

Suddenly, he pounced on a stray twig and tossed it high up into the air. His mock prey flew way up, curved at the peak of the toss, and fell beyond the walls of the camp. Stormpaw snorted in amusement when he saw how satisfied Rookpaw looked by the result of his toss. *What is he trying to do with that move, catch fish?* he thought mirthfully.

Rookpaw fell into another stance quickly, and as he did so, Stormpaw noticed Cricketpaw and Wasppaw enter the camp behind their mentors. Dovesong led them, her long tail trailing lazily behind her. Next to her was Mistypool, who looked winded from their patrol, yet carried several pieces of prey in her jaws.

Cricketpaw seemed to waste no time in approaching the group of apprentices. As he neared, Stormpaw noticed that he held a sizable squirrel in his jaws — the catch nearly weighed the brown tabby down.

"Hey, Silverpaw!" Cricketpaw mumbled around the fur of his prey. "I caught this huge squirrel today! Dovesong said I could have it, but it's a bit too much for me. Wanna share?"

Next to Stormpaw, Silverpaw immediately jumped to her paws. "That's the biggest squirrel I've ever seen!" she exclaimed, not seeming to register his offer at first. When she did, she quickly added, "I'd love to have some. Thanks, Cricketpaw!"

Stormpaw watched his sister trot away with Cricketpaw to find a spot to eat. Once they chose a spot, he turned back to Rookpaw excitedly. If Wrenfeather was showing him the territory, he might get a hunting lesson, too, and he *really* wanted to impress his mentor.

"Do you have any other cool stances to show me?"

Chapter Three

Silverpaw bounced excitedly as she waited near the camp entrance with Stormpaw. Wrenfeather stood in the center of the camp, assigning the last few cats their duties as the morning sun warmed the clearing. Silverpaw couldn't keep her eyes off the deputy or her mentor beside him.

Next to her, Stormpaw stood rigid with his expression serious. The silver molly could see a shimmer of excitement in his jade eyes, though, and resisted the urge to nudge her brother playfully. Stormpaw always expressed his emotions in his own, reserved ways and as they grew older Silverpaw learned to be happy with it.

Soon enough, their mentors approached them. Wrenfeather led them wordlessly out of the camp, while Cindertalon fell into step next to the golden-brown tom. Silverpaw tried to hold back her awe as the two warriors silently padded through their forested home, the tall ferns brushing against their shoulders — and against her own muzzle.

Wrenfeather finally spoke as they stopped just outside a small clearing west of the camp. "This is the western border of our land, and this clearing is where Twolegs come during the hottest parts of greenleaf. We have to be very careful during this time, because they'll bring their dogs and set them loose into the forest."

"Are dogs really that dangerous?" Silverpaw asked as a sense of foreboding creeped along her spine. Cindertalon's expression grew grim, though he kept his thoughts to himself as Wrenfeather continued with a nod.

"Almost every greenleaf, one of our warriors gets injured by a dog — or they get injured fleeing from one. Luckily for you two, the Twolegs never show up this late into the season."

As Wrenfeather took up a steady pace again, leading the two apprentices south along the borderlines, Silverpaw glanced back at

the clearing in awe. She noticed how Stormpaw tensed beside her at Wrenfeather's words, but didn't say anything about it. *Maybe the stories of the dog attacks are the scariest to him,* Silverpaw thought with a sideways glance at him.

"Beyond this border is SwiftClan territory," Cindertalon announced when they paused again. Silverpaw peered around him and looked over the vast moorlands that stretched before them. Marshes spotted the lowest points of the land, the muddy waters noticeably high, even for a new apprentice like her.

"Usually during border patrols, we might spot a few of their warriors racing along the hilltops, or even helping a traveling outsider out of the patches of swampland." Wrenfeather swept his tail toward the muddy sections as he spoke.

"They just . . . run?" Stormpaw let out a confused mew, and when Silverpaw looked at him, she saw his gaze searching for evidence of his mentor's claims.

Cindertalon shot both of the apprentices a meaningful glance. "Not everyone has the same pastimes as us, Stormpaw. They say it helps them stay in good shape."

When Stormpaw shut his mouth in embarrassment, Silverpaw glanced at the marshes curiously. "Is someone always getting stuck in the swamps?"

"Only new apprentices who stray over the border."

Around a bend in the forest, a new patrol appeared, full of cats Silverpaw didn't recognize. A striking golden tabby molly led it, followed closely by a brown tabby tom and a tortoiseshell molly. The second she-cat trailed her amber gaze over Silverpaw and her Clanmates, as if she was searching for something.

"Greetings, Goldenflame," Wrenfeather called out warmly. "How's Turtlepelt doing?"

"Oh, she's doing quite well, Wren," the leader of the patrol called back, her tone just as friendly as the NightClan deputy. "How's our

dear sister, Dovesong? I haven't seen her at a Gathering for a few moons."

Silverpaw started at that. *'Our sister?' Wrenfeather has a sister in another Clan?* She exchanged a glance with Stormpaw, who looked nearly as taken aback as she felt. In front of her, Wrenfeather sat down as he fell into conversation with the SwiftClan cats.

"Dovesong is just as well — she's been a bit caught up lately, what with a new apprentice and her attempts to urge Mistypool and Daisynose into the elders' den."

The molly, Goldenflame, let out a scoff. *"Elders*. Goosepounce decided to retire just a few sunrises ago, but Ashwhisker is dragging her paws on it. I swear, at this rate, we'll have more elders than fresh warriors!"

"No new kits?" Wrenfeather's gaze traveled to the tortoiseshell molly, his ears perking curiously. Silverpaw followed his gaze and saw that she was still searching the forest line behind them. "Sandfoot isn't on patrols today, Sorrelfrost."

While Sorrelfrost looked embarrassed, Silverpaw felt even more shocked. *Sandfoot and Sorrelfrost, a SwiftClan warrior? And they're talking about it so openly! Stormpaw told me the elders would talk bad about these kinds of relationships!* She snuck another glance toward her brother and realized that this was all news to him, as well. Stormpaw's green eyes were stretched wide with surprise as he watched his mentor — the deputy — make conversation with the other Clan.

The brown tabby tom next to the other SwiftClan cats looked amused at Wrenfeather's comment. "Vinestar and I have been talking about having our own kits, but most of our mollies are a bit busy chasing after toms from other Clans." He let out a loud laugh as Sorrelfrost swiped at him playfully.

"Well, I'd love to catch up some more," Wrenfeather mewed as he rose to his paws suddenly, "but Cindertalon and I have to show the new apprentices the territory. Safe travels, Goldenflame, and be careful around the marshes — the waters look high even though it's

nearly leaf-fall."

As Wrenfeather led the patrol further along the border, and as the SwiftClan patrol vanished out of sight, Stormpaw trotted forward a few paces. Silverpaw heard him mumble something about the elders before he spoke up, addressing his mentor.

"Half-Clan relationships are just . . . discussed like that?" Silverpaw padded forward to catch up to her brother and saw that he was deep in thought as he spoke.

When he got a response, Silverpaw's mentor spoke instead of Wrenfeather. "The Clans are all at peace with each other," Cindertalon mewed, his deep voice echoing softly off the trees. "After the Great War, relationships between Clans blossomed alongside the newfound peace. After a while, the first overseer of MistClan — which was Spottedpath — proposed a change to our code; this led to cats being able to have mates in other Clans, as long as the two Clans weren't currently at war, and as long as they didn't cause issues over the potential kits."

"What if they *do* cause issues over the kits?" Silverpaw asked quietly, amazed by the ways the Clans had changed over the seasons. *That must be why the elders feel differently — they were alive back then, that was* their *normal!*

"We'll find out when we get there," Wrenfeather spoke up this time, flicking his tail. "Nobody has caused issues yet. My father had two mates himself, one in SwiftClan, and everyone seemed pretty satisfied by the outcome of things. BlazeClan even has a cat who left RushClan to be with her father, but it was a non-issue, really."

Cindertalon looked thoughtful for a moment, glancing at the two apprentices that followed them. "Occasionally, one won't know their father. Mollies are allowed to keep it a secret no matter who the father is, but that's usually because he was a r—"

"We're currently moving past the Gathering Stones," Wrenfeather interrupted his patrol partner with a pointed glance, though Silverpaw noticed it quickly. Stormpaw nudged her slightly, letting her know that he had seen it, as well. "Beyond this is our border

with RushClan, part of which is marked by the river itself. Keep your eyes peeled, because you might see one of them fishing along the river or even swimming in it."

"Swimming?" Stormpaw made a face while Silverpaw shuddered at the thought. "I can't even imagine."

"Still, it's kinda cool," Silverpaw mumbled after she considered the idea. "Wasppaw even said that they have webbed toes! That makes them pretty special."

"Why don't you ask one of them at the next Gathering, then?" Wrenfeather chuckled with a sly glance at the siblings. "We don't often meet their patrols."

"Wait, the *next* Gathering?" Silverpaw leapt forward happily at the idea. "You mean we get to go?"

"Of course." Wrenfeather paused dramatically before he continued speaking. "That is, if your training goes well. You've got a little under a half moon to convince me, so don't goof off, you two."

Stormpaw remained silent next to Silverpaw, but when she looked at him she could see a glint of determination in his eyes. She felt worried herself — they hadn't even started their training yet, and she didn't know how they could meet Wrenfeather's expectations so soon. Despite her doubts, Silverpaw decided to accept Wrenfeather's challenge.

Once he saw that the two younger cats had been satisfied, Wrenfeather continued describing the territory to them. "If you follow this river north, you'll find Starfalls, the sacred spot where medicine cats can try to speak to StarClan." They'd come across the river that marked the northern half of the RushClan border, and Silverpaw noticed that the air carried a hint of freshness to it. "Every apprentice must make the trip to Starfalls before their warrior ceremony, as well."

"Do warrior apprentices dream like the medicine cats do?" Silverpaw asked, mystified by the thought of speaking to their ancestors.

"Only rarely," Wrenfeather responded with a muffled laugh. "StarClan hasn't even been talking to the medicine cats so much lately."

Wrenfeather fell silent as he continued to lead the patrol through their territory, marking the borders appropriately and instructing the apprentices as they traveled. Once they returned to camp, it was about sunhigh, and Silverpaw could see the next patrol gathering near the camp entrance. Dawnstrike was with them, alongside Ferrettail, Falconpaw, and Newtsplash. The spiky-furred, tortoisehell-tabby molly looked all too happy to be participating in warrior duties with her own kits as apprentices.

Silverpaw recognized the dark silver-and-white fur of her mother and bounced toward her happily. *She'll be so excited to hear that me and Stormpaw can go to a Gathering already!* she thought, her fur prickling from her happiness.

"Hey, mom!" she chirped as she neared Mintwillow. "Wrenfeather said we get to go to the next Gathering if we train hard enough!"

"Oh yeah?" Mintwillow responded gently, though her green eyes looked distant. "That's nice, darling. You should get to training, though — the Gathering isn't too far away."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Silverpaw murmured as her excitement ebbed away quickly. Something about her mother's distance seemed off to her, but she shrugged it off after a moment. "Cindertalon hasn't even started my training though—"

"Actually, Wrenfeather just gave me the day off to start showing you some moves." Cindertalon's deep voice startled Silverpaw as he approached her.

"What? Really?" Silverpaw spun to face her mentor, bouncing excitedly as the news made her spirits perk up. "Awesome!" She turned around again to say her farewells to her mother, only to notice that she'd vanished, leaving a half-eaten mole by the fresh-kill pile. *Maybe she misses being in the nursery with us,* Silverpaw thought curiously when Cindertalon started leading her back out of

the camp. *Or maybe she was busy.*

Cindertalon didn't waste any time as he veered onto a worn-down path that led to the training grounds. Silverpaw followed him closely, noticing how seasons of paw prints had been molded into the earth beneath her. Up ahead, she heard the voice of Dovesong, who sounded painfully exasperated with what must have been a sparring match between apprentices.

"No, Cricketpaw, swipe *under* him when he does that move! No, no, not like that!"

Silverpaw could imagine the grey tabby's frustrated expression as her voice echoed out of the clearing ahead of her. She paused beside her mentor just outside of the moss-covered clearing and saw that Cricketpaw was pinned beneath Rookpaw. Their mentors, Dovesong and Sandfoot, were both watching over them from the sidelines.

With a glance back at Silverpaw and a beckoning flick of his tail, Cindertalon padded into the clearing with a phantom-like silence. "Perhaps Cricketpaw could use a newer apprentice as a sparring partner."

Silverpaw noticed how both of the warriors jumped at her mentor's sudden appearance, while Rookpaw seemed unphased by his father's inherent stealthiness. After recovering from his surprise, Sandfoot glanced at the newcomers and inspected Silverpaw from a distance.

"That might be best," the pale orange tom murmured thoughtfully. "Rookpaw's assessment isn't far away now — this next Gathering may very well be his last. He's leagues ahead of the newer apprentices."

"It's settled then." Cindertalon stole a glance at Rookpaw and Silverpaw noticed a hint of pride flash across his gaze. "Perhaps we should demonstrate a few moves first—This is Silverpaw's first training session."

"Have you even taught her the warrior code yet, Cindertalon?"

Dovesong mewed teasingly, her green gaze intent on Silverpaw. There was the tiniest presence of skepticism, and it made Silverpaw's fur crawl as she grew self-conscious. *Dovesong is right, shouldn't he be teaching me that stuff first?*

"Relax, Dovesong," Cindertalon rolled his eyes a bit at the older molly. "Wrenfeather and I just took her and Stormpaw on a tour of the borders. I figured she could use something a little more exciting after all that walking."

"Alright, have it your way. Sandfoot and I will demonstrate — Silverpaw, pay close attention."

Sandfoot stepped into the center of the clearing with Dovesong and they quickly fell into fighting stances. Silverpaw noticed how their paws were spread to evenly distribute their balance and weight, and how their eyes never left one another. Suddenly, Dovesong pounced at Sandfoot and wrestled him until he was pinned against the mossy floor. Sandfoot quickly raised his hindlegs and kicked against her belly, sending the grey molly off of him.

Silverpaw leaned forward, anticipating their next moves with bated breath. She jumped a bit as Sandfoot rushed forward and hooked himself on Dovesong's back, his paws tight around her shoulders while she struggled to shake him loose. Suddenly, she went limp, almost as if she were dead. Then, she wriggled easily out of Sandfoot's grasp and gave him a gentle prod at his throat, signifying her victory.

"Did you catch all that?" Dovesong asked, turning to the silver apprentice.

"Um . . . I think so," Silverpaw mewed hesitantly, trying to remember each step the warriors had taken.

"Dovesong, that was more than one move," Cindertalon criticized her gently. "It'd be better to start with the second one you demonstrated, since it was the last one she saw — where Sandfoot leaped onto your back. Silverpaw, try that move with Cricketpaw. Usually the smaller apprentice would leap onto the larger one, but you're both about the same height already . . . ."

"Are you calling me small?" Cricketpaw spoke up, shooting Silverpaw a playful glance as her mentor spoke.

"No, he's got a point. Silverpaw and Stormpaw have both grown pretty quickly, and they're about your size already despite being two moons younger." Sandfoot murmured thoughtfully from where he stood.

"Enough." Dovesong stepped back to the bordering undergrowth with a roll of her eyes. Silverpaw thought she could see a hint of amusement hiding beneath the molly's annoyance. "Silverpaw, see if you can't wriggle yourself out of Cricketpaw's grasp."

With an unsure glance at her own mentor, Silverpaw nodded and stepped forward to face Cricketpaw. The older brown tabby gave her an encouraging nod before rushing forward and tricking her with a false swipe. Then, he hooked himself onto her shoulders the same way Sandfoot did to Dovesong. Silverpaw hesitated as she tried to recall how the grey tabby had moved to get out of his grip.

While she hesitated, however, Cricketpaw's grip seemed to tighten. Silverpaw felt her heartbeat pick up a few paces, and she started breathing quickly as she struggled in his grip in an attempt to break free. It felt like her heart was about to beat right out of her chest, and her vision became disoriented in her panic.

"Stop!" Cindertalon called out, his voice suddenly deafening to Silverpaw. "Cricketpaw, let go — Silverpaw, focus on me."

As the weight vanished from Silverpaw's shoulders, she took a few deep breaths and glanced at her mentor shamefully. *I totally failed that, didn't I?* When she met Cindertalon's amber gaze, she could see he only looked concerned and confused, not ashamed of her.

"Silverpaw, why did you panic?"

"W-Well I was trying to think—"

"Then you thought *too* much — don't overthink this," Cindertalon cut her off as if he knew what she was going to say.

"Just let your body react naturally. Let's try this again, but reverse the roles. Pay attention to how Cricketpaw frees himself, and remember, no claws."

Silverpaw nodded to Cindertalon and turned to face her denmate once again. She was painfully aware of the fact that everyone's attention was trained on her, but when she saw the reassurance in Cricketpaw's expression, she managed to put it out of her mind. Silverpaw ran toward him, darting behind him and leaping onto his back quickly.

The molly fastened her forelegs around Cricketpaw's shoulders, careful not to actually restrict his breathing at all. The brown tabby tom was quick to let himself fall limp, and Silverpaw noticed how easily he broke free even when she moved her paws to regain control. Once Cricketpaw stepped away, Cindertalon gave an approving nod.

"Okay, now try it again the first way," he ordered gently.

With a deep breath and a nod, Silverpaw took up a defensive stance. She watched Cricketpaw as he took a leap forward and ducked behind her. This time, when he fastened his paws around her shoulders, Silverpaw quickly thought over the technique. *Let your body go limp, tricking the opponent into letting go,* she told herself as she shut her eyes and let herself go limp. *Free yourself.* Silverpaw slid her body downwards and out of Cricketpaw's grip. Then she twisted her body and went for a finishing move, managing to pin Cricketpaw to the mossy earth gently.

"Sloppy, but much better," Cindertalon praised her warmly. "With practice, you'll be sure to perfect it."

"I hope so," Silverpaw murmured as she let Cricketpaw up, happy that she earned her mentor's approval. The apprentice she had sparred with looked proud, his amber eyes shining radiantly in the midday sunlight. "Should I keep practicing with Cricketpaw?"

Cindertalon looked thoughtful to the idea for a moment before he shook his head. "No, come over this way. I wanna take some time to show you some more beginner-friendly moves and tricks."

With a sweeping motion of his tail, Cindertalon led the apprentice to a more secluded spot in the moss-strewn clearing and started to show her the basics of warrior combat.

Chapter Four

[image]

Stormpaw stretched his muscles as he padded to face Wasppaw in the middle of the moss-covered training clearing. Silverpaw and Cricketpaw were sparring nearby, and Cindertalon was watching over them closely. His narrowed, amber eyes burned into Stormpaw's pelt momentarily, and the apprentice acted as if he didn't notice it. At the far end of the clearing, Rookpaw and Falconpaw were training with Ferrettail. The brown-and-white warrior's commanding voice rang out over the clearing, nearly distracting Stormpaw from his own task.

Though, it wasn't like he was finding it easy to concentrate in the first place. He was *supposed* to be sparring with Wasppaw to practice the new moves he'd been learning. Instead, he found himself dwelling on his anger toward his mother. A few sunrises before the extensive training session, Stormpaw had seen her give Silverpaw the same treatment she'd been giving him. The grey-furred apprentice dug his claws into the moss beneath him as he remembered exactly what he had witnessed.

"Hey, mother, guess what I did today!" Silverpaw had mewed excitedly. Stormpaw perked up from where he sat outside the elders' den and pressed beneath a nearby creeping root. Once he was sure his sister wouldn't see him, he peeked out of his hiding spot to watch their mother's behavior.

"What is it, dear?" Mintwillow responded quietly—distantly. Stormpaw looked closer and saw that her green eyes weren't even focused on Silverpaw. Instead, they were fixated on the thin air just over the young molly's shoulder.

"I caught my first squirrel today!" Silverpaw bounced a bit as she said it, her tail even fluffier than usual from her excitement. "Cindertalon said those can be tricky because they climb trees."

"Hm." Mintwillow grunted, hardly seeming to register her daughter's words. "That's nice, darling."

Without another word, the dark silver tabby had pushed past Silverpaw to grab from the fresh-ki ll pile, and then she carried a thrush to the edge of the clearing—far from her children—and sat to eat it. Stormpaw narrowed his eyes as he saw Silverpaw's tail droop, and her ears fell back, but the movements were brief. She recovered quickly and glanced around to see if anyone had witnessed the exchange and, when she saw nobody, she trotted to the apprentices' den.

A harsh shove from Wasppaw brought Stormpaw back to the present. He met the older apprentice's green gaze and saw how impatient he looked as he tried to start their sparring match.

"Come *on,* Stormpaw," the golden tom hissed at him. "Have you got dandelion fuzz for brains? We're here to spar, not daydream."

Stormpaw rolled his eyes and quickly stepped into the motions of the training he'd learned over his first half-moon as an apprentice. He side-stepped around Wasppaw's outstretched paw, lashed out his own unsheathed paw to check the golden-speckled tom in the shoulder.

While Stormpaw recalled the training he'd received from Wrenfeather, Wasppaw became relentless with his own moves. Several times he struck out so powerfully that he pushed Stormpaw backwards a few whisker-lengths. With each pushy blow, Stormpaw could feel his anger toward his mother converting into a vexation toward his mentor's son. The final straw was when Wasppaw aimed a blow at his ear and missed, swiping him across the muzzle instead. Even though his claws were sheathed, the force of it made Stormpaw's nose burn.

"Cut it out!" he hissed loudly, lashing out at Wasppaw. Too late, he realized that he had unsheathed his claws, drawing a bit of blood on the other apprentice's cheek.

"You cut it out!" Wasppaw snarled, and Stormpaw flinched as he felt a searing pain across his nose. Wasppaw had clawed Stormpaw back, and was glaring at him, his green eyes narrowed and his tail

lashing.

Suddenly, Stormpaw was launching himself at Wasppaw, and the two toms flung their claws at each other in a flurry of mutual anger. His resentment pushed him forward, and he tumbled with Wasppaw in a hissing tangle of fur and flying paws.

"Break it up, you two!" Cindertalon's voice rang through the clearing, but Stormpaw barely took notice of it. He kept flinging his paws at Wasppaw, who returned the blows twice as hard, not seeming to pay attention to the warrior's order.

Before Stormpaw knew what was happening, Ferrettail had shoved himself between the two apprentices, easily batting their paws away from him. Stormpaw stumbled back and met Ferrettail's harsh gaze boldly, not wanting to cower in front of the other apprentices. Wasppaw, on the other hand, quickly knelt to the ground before the warrior.

"What is wrong with you two?" Ferrettail hissed quietly to them, his forest-green eyes glittering with anger.

"Wasppaw started it!" Stormpaw shot back quickly, meeting Ferrettail's gaze without flinching. "He kept shoving me backwards while we were sparring!"

"So you bare your claws to him?" Ferrettail took a step forward to tower over Stormpaw, and when Stormpaw refused to back down, he could have sworn he saw a flicker of understanding in his eyes.

By now, Cindertalon had stepped forward, his expression even harsher than Ferrettail's. "We've been monitoring rogue activity for moons, and now you two do this? We can't afford to have our apprentices fighting each other with bared claws, wasting Rowanspots' precious herbs. If it happens again, I'll make sure Wrenfeather finds out, and neither of you will go to the Gathering."

"Yes, Cindertalon," Wasppaw murmured apologetically.

Stormpaw opened his mouth to utter a fury-fueled retort but

quickly closed it again when he saw Cindertalon's withering glare. Instead, he simply glared back at his sister's mentor before turning to meet Silverpaw's gaze. She and Cricketpaw had stopped to watch the fight break out, and while Cricketpaw looked purely concerned, Stormpaw caught a glimpse of lingering pain in Silverpaw's eyes. As soon as they locked gazes, though, the emotion vanished and she turned to Cricketpaw, murmuring something to him.

While Stormpaw couldn't make out exactly what she said, he could hear the friendly and carefree tone she took on when speaking to their denmate. He felt his heart twist at the sound of it, thinking of how their mother had driven her into putting up those walls so fast. *I'll make sure you never have to feel hurt like that again,* Stormpaw thought angrily, clawing at the a patch of moss beneath him.

"Stormpaw, did you hear me?" Cindertalon's voice broke into his thoughts, demanding his attention. "Apologize to Wasppaw." Stormpaw scoffed and glanced around. When he did, he saw that Ferrettail had already returned to the far side of the clearing to train Falconpaw and Rookpaw. Briefly, he caught the warrior's eye, and decided to listen to Cindertalon.

"I'm sorry, Wasppaw," Stormpaw muttered reluctantly. "I wasn't trying to hurt you."

"It's fine," Wasppaw responded with an embarrassed sigh. "I shouldn't have been so rough, either."

The two toms hesitantly fell back into their sparring match, each of them making sure to be more gentle than before. Even though he tried to concentrate, Stormpaw couldn't seem to rid his mind of his worries. After a while, Ferrettail brought Rookpaw and Falconpaw over to participate, and then pulled Stormpaw aside.

"What's eating at you, kit?" Ferrettail mewed softly once they were both out of earshot. He sat up against the edge of the mossy clearing, his tail curled stiffly around his paws as he watched Stormpaw expectantly. Stormpaw returned a wary gaze as he considered his answer.

"Nothing," he mumbled after a moment of consideration. "I just had a bad morning, and Wasppaw pushed it."

"Cats don't usually start fights over a bad morning," Ferrettail shot back smoothly, shooting Stormpaw a sideways glance.

"I do, apparently," Stormpaw retorted with a roll of his eyes. He knew he was behaving ridiculous, but he couldn't help it. Without realizing, Stormpaw let his gaze stray to where Silverpaw had started training with the other apprentices. Rookpaw and Falconpaw were showing them all more advanced moves, and he could tell that his sister was pushing herself harder than ever.

"Did something happen with your sister?" Stormpaw started when Ferrettail spoke to him. He tore his gaze from Silverpaw and met Ferrettail's curious green eyes.

"No," he mewed guardedly. Stormpaw didn't miss how the warrior next to him eyed him at his response, though there were no further questions.

"Alright, then." Ferrettail stood with a shrug and nodded to the training apprentices. "If you decide you want a less judgemental ear, you know where to find me, kit. Go on back to your training."

Stormpaw gave Ferrettail one last uncertain glance before returning to train with the other apprentices. He fell into training with them, learning new moves from the older two toms and practicing them with his denmates while Cindertalon and Ferrettail watched over them. By the time they were finished, the sun hung far overhead, and every one of them was worn out.

As Cindertalon and Ferrettail led them back to the NightClan camp, Stormpaw found himself struggling to catch his breath. Silverpaw looked to be in the same position as him, her chest heaving and her steps short, as though her muscles were already sore. Cricketpaw and Wasppaw looked to be in only slightly better shape, while Rookpaw and Falconpaw seemed entirely unbothered by the long training session.

Once they were all inside the camp, Cindetalon turned to the six

apprentices and flicked the tip of his tail. "You can all go eat. Falconpaw and Rookpaw, you two are scheduled to feed the elders tonight."

Cindertalon hardly wasted any time before fetching himself a piece of prey and joining Sandfoot in the shade of an overhanging root. Ferrettail had vanished somewhere along the way without drawing attention, but Stormpaw barely paid attention to the fact. Now that he knew so many cats would so openly discuss half-Clan relationships, he figured that behavior like that—cats slipping away at the back of a patrol, and returning to camp later—was simply a weak attempt to hide it.

At the far edge of the clearing, outside of the warriors' den, he saw Mintwillow sitting with Newtsplash and Dovesong. The three mollies were chatting casually to each other, and the sight made Stormpaw's blood boil. *So she can act normal with her friends, but not with us?* he thought furiously, tearing his claws into the soft earth beneath him. *We're her children! How could she do this so suddenly?* Stormpaw turned away from the three mollies angrily, staring down at his dark grey-striped paws while his denmated bounded toward the fresh-kill pile.

"What, did your mother tell you to clean the elders' bedding or something?"

Stormpaw nearly jumped two tail-lengths into the air when Ferrettail spoke up behind him. He turned around to face the warrior and saw that his fur was still ruffled from nosing his way through the entrance to the camp.

"That's not it," Stormpaw mewed slowly as he eyed Ferrettail. Briefly, he wondered why the warrior was showing so much interest in his issues.

"What is it, then?" Ferrettail pressed, glancing toward Mintwillow briefly. "You know, normally a cat doesn't just look at their parent with a glare that could cut through fur."

Stormpaw held his green gaze for a few moments and finally caved, letting out a sigh. "She's been cold to us ever since we

became apprentices. A few sunrises ago, I saw her completely brush Silverpaw off after being told about a good catch. Silverpaw looked so hurt, and I just . . . I don't know. It made me really mad."

"Oh, I get it now," Ferrettail murmured softly. "You couldn't care less if it were only you, but your sister is hurt from this, too. You wanna protect her."

"Why are you so interested, anyways?" Stormpaw queried, narrowing his eyes suspiciously. "You're not my mentor or anything."

"Well, I don't see your mentor inviting himself to ask," Ferrettail retorted with a laugh. "Besides, I understand more than you might realize, Stormpaw."

"Maybe he isn't, but he's the deputy!" Stormpaw hissed softly, glaring at the warrior next to him. *Wrenfeather shouldn't have to pry into my life just because he's my mentor!*

"A cat can multitask, you know." Ferrettail relaxed visibly as he let his gaze roam the clearing, as if he were looking for Wrenfeather. When he didn't see the golden-brown tom, he continued, "Besides, what does he do, assign a few patrols and order a couple cats around the camp?"

At first, Stormpaw felt taken aback by his bluntness, then he reconsidered. "But . . . won't he become the leader someday, after my uncle is gone? That seems pretty important to me."

"Sure, maybe it is, but this is *now."* As Ferrettail held Stormpaw's gaze, the apprentice felt like his soul was being searched. "Even then, a leader is nothing without his warriors."

"Hey, Fer, over here! Come on!" Dawnstrike called from across the clearing, a mouse hanging by its tail from her jaws.

"Patience, Dawn, I was just having a word with Stormpaw." At that, Ferrettail rose to his paws and nodded a farewell to the long-furred apprentice. He padded away from Stormpaw and met Dawnstrike, who seemed happy to see her Clanmate. With a bit of a

start, Stormpaw realized that it was the first time he'd ever seen Dawnstrike without her being frighteningly angry.

Once Ferrettail stood near the cream molly, Stormpaw saw him whisper something to her. Dawnstrike shot a glance at the apprentice afterward, and when he caught it he didn't see any of the usual distaste within her piercing green eyes. Instead, there was a deep interest within them. Stormpaw held her gaze for a moment before shrugging and finally making his way toward the fresh-kill pile. A short ways away from the apprentices' den, he saw Rookpaw sitting alone, so he picked up a small thrush and padded over.

"Mind if I eat here?" Stormpaw mewed quietly, noticing how Rookpaw's gaze seemed distant.

"Go for it," Rookpaw responded, nodding to the spot beside him. After Stormpaw sat, he shifted and murmured, "Is your mother still ignoring you?" When he turned to meet the younger apprentice's gaze, Stormpaw could see a hint of curiosity, though for some reason he felt like he wasn't supposed to.

"Yeah . . . it's just– I don't know. I don't understand." Stormpaw let out a heavy sigh as he started picking at his thrush. Not far away, a flash of pale silvery fur caught his eye; Silverpaw was eating alone, her blue eyes troubled. As Stormpaw's anger resurfaced, he dug his claws into the earth near his meal, disturbing the layer of old pine needles. *Maybe I should go sit with her.*

"I'm sure it'll explain itself in time." Rookpaw shifted again, as if he were trying to get comfortable. "If it doesn't, you don't need her. You'll make better relationships over time."

"Is it that simple?" Stormpaw tore his gaze from his sister and took another bite of his food. *Would it be that easy for her, too?*

"I wouldn't know," Rookpaw responded with a shrug. "I'm sure it's gotta be hard, but don't let yourself get too angry over it. I'm know not as educated in the Clan beliefs as the rest of you, but the elders always told me of a darker place near StarClan. They said when you let your anger fester, dark cats will visit you in your dreams and make you evil."

"You believe that?" Stormpaw scoffed at him as he finished his thrush. "Those are just stories they tell us so that we'll behave, you know."

"I don't see why I shouldn't believe it. If you have StarClan, why shouldn't there be an afterlife for the evil cats, too?"

"I guess you have a point." Stormpaw glanced toward the elders' den, where he saw Lynxtail, Warblerwing, and Snailbelly laying in a patch of sun. Vinecrawl was nowhere to be seen, and he assumed she must be inside their den. "Speaking of the elders, how come you and Falconpaw had to take them food today? Usually that's my job, or Silverpaw's."

"Maybe it was some kind of final duty assignment, since our assessments are coming up." Rookpaw glanced around and Stormpaw followed his gaze, noticing Falconpaw with their sister, Icepaw.

"Do you think you'll pass?" At the mention of the assessment, Stormpaw wondered what it could involve.

"Most apprentices do," Rookpaw mumbled with a matter-of-factly tone.

"Sure, but do you think *you* will?" Stormpaw pressed curiously. He was sure the quiet tom would pass—Rookpaw was one of the best hunters even though he was still an apprentice. Even the warriors constantly praised him, though Stormpaw had overheard a few of them admitting they were unsettled by how he managed to sneak up on the rest of them so often.

"Of course he will," Falconpaw boasted as he padded up. Stormpaw glanced at him and saw how muscular the dark grey tom was compared to his brother. He glanced to where he had just seen the him speaking to Icepaw, and saw that the grey-and-white molly was watching her brothers.

"Sandfoot says we shouldn't doubt ourselves," Rookpaw added quickly, though he looked indifferent to the entire conversation.

Stormpaw fell silent as he considered that. *That's a good point,* he thought to himself after a moment. *If we doubt ourselves we could be more likely to trip up—or start fights.* While he was silently cursing himself—and admiring the older apprentices—Stormpaw barely noticed that Wrenfeather had approached. It wasn't until Falconpaw stood to leave with Rookpaw on his tail that he noticed his mentor.

"Stormpaw." Wrenfeather's serious voice startled Stormpaw, and when he turned to his mentor he saw disappointment burning in his eyes.

"Wrenfeather?" He sat up a bit taller when he addressed Wrenfeather, anticipating his next words.

"I heard what happened with Wasppaw. Is everything alright?"

Stormpaw's ears burned with shame when his mentor brought up the fight, though his tone was much softer than he expected. "U-Um, yeah, everything's fine," he stammered slowly as he sat upright.

"Then why would you unsheathe your claws during training?" Wrenfeather sat down and, while he looked and sounded calm, Stormpaw didn't miss how the tip of his tail bobbed behind him. "I know you haven't been an apprentice for long, but I'm certain I've taught you better."

With each word, Stormpaw grew more and more ashamed of himself. "Wasppaw was being too aggressive—"

"That doesn't excuse it," Wrenfeather snapped quickly before composing himself. "Look, I can see that you're having a hard time right now, and I won't pry, but next time you need to keep your cool."

"Yes, Wrenfeather," Stormpaw murmured softly, bowing his head to the dappled golden-brown tom. After a moment of silence, he tentatively added, "Does this mean I can't go to the Gathering?"

"Huh?" Wrenfeather looked surprised by the question as his expression softened. "No, no. You can still go; you and your sister have both progressed enough to earn it."

"R-Really? Awesome!" Stormpaw brightened at the idea of going to his first Gathering, and meeting the apprentices of the other Clans. "Thank you, Wrenfeather!"

"Don't thank me just yet." Wrenfeather narrowed his eyes and gave Stormpaw one final, half-scolding glare. "If you get into another fight, you'll be on elder duties for a moon."

"Don't give your apprentice such a hard time, Wrennie. We both know that Wasppaw can be a bit much, even for us." As Stormpaw nodded diligently, Newtsplash padded up with a squirrel hanging from her jaws. She waved her fluffy tail at Stormpaw, and he quickly nodded a greeting to his mentor's mate. Wrenfeather gave a defeated sigh as she quickly won him over, and as the two warriors padded away, Stormpaw remembered that Newtsplash and his own mother were friends. *I wonder if she knows why my mom is acting how she is,* he thought just before he caught her sympathetic eye. *She definitely knows something.*

Instead of dwelling on it more, Stormpaw rose and padded to where Silverpaw sat. If he couldn't make their mom acknowledge them again, then he'd at least make sure Silverpaw was doing okay.

Chapter Five

Silverpaw trotted excitedly beside Stormpaw as they were led to the Gathering. At the front of the group, Thistlestar set a calm pace with Wrenfeather, Rowanspots, and Icepaw at his flanks. Shortly in front of the two apprentices were Cindertalon, Dawnstrike, and Mistypool, the last of which was followed closely by Wasppaw. Right behind them was Vinecrawl, the elder she-cat taking up a slightly slower pace than the rest.

Once in a while, Silverpaw spotted Dawnstrike pause to glance back at her mother. There was an odd glint in her eyes that made Silverpaw's chest tighten with sympathy—she felt like she was quickly starting to understand Dawnstrike's own turbulent emotions toward her mother. A mother who kept her kits a tail's length away, keeping the secret of their father from them and their Clanmates.

It hardly took them long to reach the clearing where the Gathering was held. Silverpaw glanced excitedly at her brother as they waited for Thistlestar's call and, when he finally gave it, they streamed into the clearing with their Clanmates. Once inside, Silverpaw looked for where Cindertalon had told her to sit—it was a sandy patch of earth near the southern end of the clearing. There were already a few apprentices sitting there while their older Clanmates mingled, so Silverpaw bounded over with Stormpaw and Wasppaw at her tail.

"Hi, Wasppaw!" called a ginger tabby molly. "Who are these two?"

"Hey, Vixenpaw," Wasppaw greeted her, looking friendly. "This is Stormpaw," he paused to wave his tail at the dark grey tom, and then at Silverpaw herself, "and this is Silverpaw. They're the newest apprentices of NightClan!"

"Welcome to the Gathering!" the other apprentices chimed.

"Thank you," Silverpaw dipped her head, their quick greetings

filling her with warmth. She noticed how Stormpaw stayed stiff and silent next to her and elbowed him meaningfully.

"Er . . . yeah, thanks," Stormpaw murmured awkwardly.

"I've never seen a tabby without stripes on their body!" a dark brown tom blurted suddenly, causing the lighter brown molly beside him to cough loudly.

"Webpaw!" she hissed angrily before glancing back toward Silverpaw and Stormpaw apologetically. "I'm sorry, he doesn't get out much. He just means to say he thinks you two look nice."

"Uh . . . thanks?" Stormpaw shot a helpless glance at Silverpaw as Wasppaw started nudging him closer to the other apprentices. Silverpaw held back a chuckle while he succumbed to the flurry of questions from the other apprentices. She slipped around Wasppaw to sit at the edge of the group, wanting to see what kinds of cats sat in the crowds.

Five cats sat perched on top of the Tallrock in the middle of the Gathering Stones. Alongside Thistlestar, there was a brown-and-white tabby molly, a pale grey molly with wispy, winding stripes, and there was a dark grey tabby tom with shockingly long fur around his neck and shoulders. *That one must be Wolfstar!* Silverpaw thought as she realized just how aged the tom looked. She remembered the elders telling her that he was the oldest living cats in the Clans—the only one who was a warrior during the Great War and the restoration of MistClan. Even the elders had all been kits or young apprentices, hardly old enough to recall the devastating battle.

On a lower ledge of the Gathering Stones rested pale ginger tabby molly with friendly blue eyes. Beside her was a serious-looking brown tabby tom, his head lowered as he whispered to her. Silverpaw tilted her head, trying to decide who the three mollies were; she knew they were the leaders of the other Clans, but the warriors didn't talk much about them.

In the crowds below the stones, Silverpaw recognized Goldenflame and a tall brown tabby tom from her first patrol of the

borders, and realized that the SwiftClan cats must have taken up that space. In their group was an older-looking dark grey molly, along with a pale golden tabby molly and a taller, dilute tortoiseshell she-cat who sat with their tails intertwined.

There was a crowd that seemed to cluster beneath Wolfstar's towering form, and Silverpaw figured that those were the cats of RushClan. Most of them stayed close beneath their leader's shadow —besides the broad-shouldered silver molly directly beneath Wolfstar, there was a slender yellow molly next to a darker yellow tabby tom, and a dappled brown tom with a narrow face. There was an outlier, though; a handsome, brown-furred tom with darker spots around his eyes sat about halfway between the group of RushClan cats and another group. Beside him was a pretty-looking brownish-grey molly, her amber eyes twinkling with friendliness as they, too, scanned over the clearing.

Not far from the pair was a group of cats who looked more broad-shouldered than the rest, their muscles rippling beneath their pelts. *That must be BlazeClan!* Silverpaw realized as she remembered the stories her mentor had told her, about how the BlazeClan cats turned barren, rocky land into their home. Before she could continue scanning the cats, though, a conversation from the other apprentices caught her attention.

"Oh, Wasppaw, what happened?" the light brown molly was asking, her yellow eyes round with worry. "You've got a scratch on your face!"

"Oh, that?" Wasppaw visibly faltered for a second but, after a glance in Stormpaw's direction, he puffed out his chest proudly. "Yeah, we got into a bit of a tussle with some rogues. It's okay though, Lilypaw. We won."

Silverpaw immediately exchanged a glance with Stormpaw and rolled her eyes playfully. *That must be the RushClan apprentice that he's been mooning over,* she thought, growing amused. When she caught a flash of cream-colored fur in the corner of her eye, Silverpaw turned her head and saw Dawnstrike making her way to the back of the crowds. She didn't pay much attention to the sour-tempered warrior, though, as the conversations beside her carried

on.

"Where's your brother, Vixenpaw?" Webpaw asked curiously with a glance at the ginger molly. "Last moon you said that he never misses a Gathering!"

Vixenpaw let out an exasperated sigh before responding. "Sneezepaw kept talking back to Deerskip, so she put him on elder duties for a moon!"

"What about Molepaw and Briarpaw?" Lilypaw spoke up suddenly, glancing between them all. "They said they never missed a Gathering, too!"

Silverpaw shuffled closer to Stormpaw as Webpaw reared up onto his hindlegs to peer over the heads of cats in front of them. "There they are!" he mewed, having spotted them in the crowds. "They must have earned their warrior names!" He pointed toward two brown tabbies that sat among the BlazeClan cats, and Silverpaw saw that they kept their heads held high and their chests puffed out proudly. The sight filled her with anticipation for her own warrior ceremony, and she found herself absent-mindedly clawing at the sandy earth beneath her.

"They look so proud of themselves," Silverpaw voiced her thoughts softly, mostly speaking to herself.

"Of course they do!" Wasppaw murmured, looking equally as excited as she felt. "Becoming a warrior is a big deal!"

"Shh!" Webpaw perked up suddenly. "The leaders are starting to speak!"

At the top of the stones, the pale grey tabby stepped forward first, her green eyes looking troubled. "A mysterious sickness is spreading through the elders of SwiftClan," she mewed slowly, as if she were calculating her words carefully. "It has already claimed the life of Palespirit, and Bristlehawk and Snakefang have also fallen ill. It displays the symptoms of greencough, though no herbs seem to help. Buzzardstar, please pass the news onto Aspenblaze." She then took a few paces back, nodding to the she-cat that she had

addressed.

"Of course, Vinestar," the brown-and-white molly mewed, dipping her head to the other leader as she padded forward. "My deepest condolences for your loss. At the edges of BlazeClan territory, the rogues from the Twolegplace have grown unusually quiet. We also have two new warriors to announce—please welcome Briarthorn and Molefang!"

"Briarthorn! Molefang!" Briefly, the clearing erupted into cheers for the new warriors of BlazeClan. Silverpaw reared up onto her paws to cheer alongside the other apprentices, feeling deep admiration for the warriors even though she hadn't even met them. After the cheering died down, Buzzardstar nodded toward the spotted ginger tabby below them, motioning for her to speak.

"Things are well for MistClan," the molly mewed slowly after taking a few pawsteps forward. She kept the following sentences simple, as if she were afraid of taking up too much time. "Hickoryseed has moved into the nursery and is expecting Lizardspring's kits. The rogues have also become quiet in our territory."

Wolfstar hardly gave the other leader time to finish her announcements as he stepped forward, giving her a pointed look. "Congratulations, Lichenstar," he drawled slowly, the dry tone he took surprising Silverpaw. "RushClan has also lost one of its elders. A snake found its way into the camp while the elders were resting on our sunning stones. I tried to stop it, but I was too late; Smokesnout got bit and passed away."

As Wolfstar bowed his head in mourning, Silverpaw saw the brownish-grey molly from earlier doing the same. She tilted her head and opened her mouth to speak to the apprentices with her, but right when she started, Wasppaw interrupted her.

"Why is Shellskip mourning? I thought she was a BlazeClan cat," he muttered bluntly, twitching his tail tip as he spoke.

"Smokesnout was her mother," Lilypaw informed them quickly, while Webpaw rolled his eyes a bit. "She and Toadpounce, the tom

next to her, were some of our half-Clan cats. Shellskip left RushClan to be with her father in BlazeClan before Webpaw and I were born, but our Clanmates still talk about her pretty often."

"Some of your half-Clan cats?" Silverpaw echoed, tilting her head curiously. "You mean there's more?"

Using her tail, Lilypaw pointed toward the small gathering of elders a few fox-lengths away. "Minnowbrook is mates with Brambletuft from BlazeClan, and both of our mentors—Sleekthistle and Reedtuft—along with the deputy are their children."

Silverpaw craned her head toward where the elders sat by each other. While most of the elders sat with a tail-length or two between them, she noticed that a dark yellow tom laid curled around a more slender silver tabby molly. Even though it was good to see that the Clans were more accepting of half-Clan relationships than the NightClan elders had led her to believe, the sight filled Silverpaw with a painful feeling of uneasiness. *If my father were a Clan cat, surely Mintwillow would be open about it,* she thought to herself, not noticing the frown that had taken residence on her own face.

"Silverpaw?" Stormpaw whispered to her, startling her out of her thoughts. When Silverpaw turned to her brother with a more cheery expression, she saw that, to her relief, his concern faded away. "Uncle Thistlestar is about to speak, look!"

On the Tallrock, Silverpaw noticed that their uncle looked a bit distracted as his amber gaze drifted across the cats below him. "Like most of you, we've seen little activity from the rogues over the past few moons. We also have two new apprentices—Silverpaw and Stormpaw."

Silverpaw frowned when Thistlestar ended his announcements abruptly, attaching a stiff nod to the end of his words. "What was *that* about?" she whispered to Stormpaw, feeling concerned about her uncle.

"I'm not sure," Stormpaw responded slowly, sounding just as distracted. "Who is *that?"*

She glanced at her brother, and then followed his gaze to the brown tabby tom she had seen speaking to the ginger tabby leader before the announcements began. He had since joined the warriors of his Clan, but now his head was craned toward the apprentices, his pale yellow eyes fixed on the group. Silverpaw shuddered when she met his eerie gaze and quickly looked away.

"Oh, that's Stoatscratch," Vixenpaw murmured softly when she saw who Stormpaw was asking about. "He's our overseer. He can be a little unnerving sometimes, but he's actually pretty nice."

"I heard about that—your overseer, I mean," Silverpaw gasped, trying to remember what Cindertalon had taught her. "Don't they keep your leader in check with the warrior code?"

"Isn't that the spotted ginger tabby?" Stormpaw interrupted before Vixenpaw could respond. "She looks so harmless."

"Lichenstar is really nice," Vixenpaw purred as she looked at her leader. "My mother, Vella, brought us there when she was really sick. Lichenstar and Batwatcher took care of Sneezepaw and I when she passed. Batwatcher is my mentor now, though sometimes Batwatcher pays a little more attention to Lichenstar than she does to me. Anyways, the overseer can also suggest changes to the warrior code depending on current affairs."

"Hush, apprentices," hissed a tabby molly with one blue and one yellow eye. "Someone is speaking!"

"Y-Yes, Willowstem," Vixenpaw mewed sheepishly while the rest of them silenced themselves.

Silverpaw quickly turned to look for the speaker and saw that it was someone in the crowds, rather than a leader atop the Tallrock. A pure-white tom stood tall, and Silverpaw could see one intense amber eye from where she sat. Suddenly he swung his head around, and she could see that next to his other eye was a gnarly scar reaching from his cheek to his chin.

"I've actually been picking up fresh traces of rogues around the abandoned Twoleg nest." When he spoke, his deep voice

reverberated through the air. "They're staying scarce enough that it's hard to detect, but it's there."

Buzzardstar towered over him from the Tallrock, her eyes widened with shock. "Absent, why couldn't you tell me this at the camp?"

"Buzzardstar, I respect you, but there was no telling if you'd warn the other Clans," the tom responded slowly, clearly unaware of how rude his words sounded. "They deserve to be warned. Amberlight and I know what it was like there—the fact that the rogues have been trespassing so far into our territory is a threat to everyone."

"Are you sure it's not your own scent you picked up?" a dark grey molly mewed from SwiftClan's crowd. She pretended to inspect her claws, but Silverpaw could see a daring glint in her eyes.

"I appreciate the concern, Ashwhisker, but I'm certain I'd know my own scent," Absent retorted dryly, not even sparing the molly a glance.

"I don't know, you *are* a rogue." Next to Silverpaw, Stormpaw tensed at the warrior's venomous words. Silverpaw felt herself grow uneasy yet again when she considered Ashwhisker's tone.

"Control your warriors, Vinestar," Buzzardstar snapped suddenly as she glared at the SwiftClan warrior. Vinestar stayed seated, though her green eyes flickered quickly to her warrior.

"Ashwhisker, that is quite enough," she spoke coolly. Even though she kept her cool, Silverpaw could see a hint of anger in the pale leader's eyes.

"Calm down, everyone," Lichenstar mewed worriedly as she rose to her paws. "We don't know that the rogues are dangerous yet—"

"Shut up, rogue-lover," Wolfstar snarled out of nowhere. Lichenstar flinched at his words, and he narrowed his eyes as he continued. "It's no secret that you let rogues wander through your territory, and even join your Clan! For the love of StarClan, your

Clan was *founded* half-full with rogues!"

While Silverpaw grew increasingly uneasy with the way the leaders started to bicker, she saw Vixenpaw shrink away from Wolfstar's words. *How could he say that? Cats like Vixenpaw couldn't help their birth!* she thought, starting to grow upset with the RushClan leader.

"Oh, stuff it, you old coot!" Buzzardstar growled, rounding on the old tom. "All of the Clans have ties to rogues at this point, it's not that big of a deal!"

"We sure don't." Wolfstar narrowed his eyes and let them trail along the crowd. "And it *will* be a big deal when an angry rogue comes to claim his—"

"Maybe you don't have direct ties to rogues," Buzzardstar interrupted him, taking a step forward, "but you took a kittypet into your ranks. That's no different than bringing in rogues."

"It most definitely is not the same!" Wolfstar sputtered out, visibly taken aback by the idea. On the other side of Vixenpaw, Silverpaw noticed that Lilypaw and Webpaw shot each other guilty-looking glances.

"That's enough!" Thistlestar called out and stepped between the two leaders. He raised his head toward the moon, and when Silverpaw followed the motion, she saw that wispy clouds were drifting across it. Then, once they passed, he dropped his gaze back to the cats below them. "Thank you for telling us of your discovery, Absent. We will *all* be on the lookout for more traces of rogue activity."

Wolfstar only glared at Thistlestar, and Silverpaw felt her stomach drop as he opened his mouth again. "You *should* be on the lookout. You've got as much love for rogues as Lichenstar, and StarClan knows it'll only attract more."

Suddenly, Thistlestar spun to face the scruffy grey tom, and Silverpaw caught a glint of moonlight off of his claws as he dug them into the stone beneath him. "Choose your next words wisely,

Wolfstar," he warned slowly, lashing his feathery tail. Silverpaw leaned forward in anticipation, her eyes wide as she watched her uncle. *Why would he threaten to break the truce over this?* Though her mind was racing, she was acutely aware of Stormpaw's body next to her own, his muscles still tense as he watched the scene unravel.

On the Tallrock, Wolfstar looked just as shocked as she felt. "I– I just mean with your medicine cat, those warriors, and all those apprentices of yours—look, it's not exactly a secret that your queens have a history with rogues—"

With that, Thistlestar was leaping down from the Tallrock and shouldering his way through the crowd. "We're finished here," he snarled over his shoulder, glaring back at Wolfstar. "Hopefully you'll learn how to behave by the next Gathering. Come on, NightClan."

For a moment, Silverpaw only watched her Clanmates file after their usually laid-back leader. When Wasppaw nudged her softly, she gave an awkward nod to the apprentices of the other Clans and rushed after them with Stormpaw at her side. She glanced at her brother and saw that his jade eyes were fixated on the ground as he walked, his pupils dilated in a dangerous glare.

All around her, Silverpaw could hear the whispers of warriors from the other Clans. She could feel their eyes burning holes into her pelt as she left the Gathering with her own Clan. Slowly, Silverpaw tore her gaze away from Stormpaw only to see Wasppaw eyeing them warily. When she caught his eye, the golden tom quickly looked away and pretended as if he hadn't been staring in the first place. Silverpaw lowered her own gaze to the ground and decided to keep it there as doubt formed inside her.

The silence of the forest was nearly as painful to bear as the whispers from the Gathering. Silverpaw quickly realized that they couldn't return to the camp fast enough, and once they finally did, she snapped her gaze back up to find her uncle. *Why would he be so upset about what Wolfstar said?* she wondered worriedly when she saw the grey-footed tom. *Are* all *Gatherings this mind-numbingly hectic?* There wasn't a memory she could recall where Thistlestar had gotten so angry—and never so quickly, either.

"Mintwillow, I need to speak to you," Thistlestar called out as soon as they were greeted by the Clan. The white-furred tom hardly waited for his sister's response as he stormed across the clearing and disappeared into his den. Silverpaw glanced uneasily at Stormpaw when their mother rushed after him.

"Should we go after them?" she whispered to him as their Clanmates slowly padded to their dens. Some of them sent uneasy glances over their shoulders, and the action made Silverpaw's stomach lurch.

"No," Stormpaw muttered quickly, his gaze locked on their uncle's den. "Look, Wrenfeather is lurking around outside the den. I doubt he'd let us get close enough to hear what they're saying."

Silverpaw held back a frustrated sigh when she saw that the deputy was indeed guarding Thistlestar's den. A few times, his green gaze flickered over to them before quickly darting away, and Silverpaw grew suspicious.

"This is about us," she stated, her tone flatter than she had intended it to be. She cleared her throat, trying to not to show how chaotic her thoughts were becoming.

"Obviously," Stormpaw retorted as he paced his front paws in front of him.

"What does any of it mean?" Silverpaw murmured more gently this time, not wanting her brother to snap at her again. "Why was he so angry at what Wolfstar said?"

"Do you really need to ask?" Stormpaw muttered, sounding distressed now. Silverpaw glanced at her brother and felt her heart twist when she saw the mixture of pained emotions in his green eyes. "It's pretty obvious, Silverpaw. Everyone else in the Clan seems to realize it, too—I know you saw how Wasppaw looked at us."

"You know what? If this is about us, then we deserve to hear it, too," she muttered as she started padding toward the leader's den. Behind her, Silverpaw heard the sound of Stormpaw leaping to his

paws and rushing after her. As she approached Thistlestar's den, she felt her pawsteps falter as her heartrate picked up, but she ignored the restrictive sensations. Wrenfeather took a step forward suddenly, blocking her path before she could get too close.

"Silverpaw, now is not the time," the deputy murmured sympathetically, trying to usher her away from the den. Silverpaw could faintly make out the sounds of a heated argument coming from the den, their words muffled by the roots and stone that encompassed it.

"Let them pass, Wrenfeather." Silverpaw started as Dawnstrike approached them suddenly. She glanced around and realized that many cats, though they had retreated to their dens, were peering out at the cats in the clearing—at herself, and at her brother.

"This doesn't involve you, Dawnstrike," Wrenfeather warned the warrior and fixed her with a hard stare. "If Thistlestar wanted them to be there, they'd be there."

Dawnstrike took a few pawsteps forward and lowered her voice so that only Wrenfeather and the two apprentices could hear. "Even if *those two* haven't openly admitted it, you and I both know that this is about them—" she motioned toward Silverpaw and Stormpaw with her tail "—and they should be in there. I know you saw that look in his eyes. Thistlestar doesn't just *lash out* like that." For once, the molly's voice wasn't taut with anger—there was a deep sadness to it, a tone that Silverpaw had never heard before.

Wrenfeather faltered for a moment and let his gaze flicker to the two apprentices in front of him. "He'll involve them when it's time, Dawnstrike. Just trust him."

Dawnstrike scoffed, but before she could make a smart remark, Thistlestar and Mintwillow exited the den. When they were faced with the apprentices, alongside the deputy and Dawnstrike, they both froze momentarily. Thistlestar's distressed expression quickly grew friendly when he met Silverpaw's doe-eyed stare, and he padded forward to meet the two apprentices while their mother only watched. In her gaze swam emotions so conflicted that Silverpaw couldn't pinpoint a single one. So many questions and

worries swam through her mind, and it started overwhelming her more than anything had that night.

"The moon is about to set, you know," Thistlestar murmured to the siblings, leaning down to nuzzle each of them gently. "I'm sure you've both got a long day of training ahead of you, so make sure you get some rest."

"But uncle Thi—" Stormpaw stepped past Silverpaw, his tone begging for the leader to shine some light on the situation that shrouded their lives.

"Stormpaw, no. Not here, and not now. Go to sleep." His tone took a slightly more commanding tone this time as he nodded toward the apprentices' den.

When she realized they weren't getting any answers from either of them, Silverpaw sighed and turned away. She flicked Stormpaw's ear with her tail as she trudged toward their den, the exhaustion of the night finally catching up to her and weighing down on her. *We just want to know what's going on,* she thought sadly with a glance over her shoulder. Silverpaw met her uncle's gaze a final time and forced a cheery expression onto her face before she entered their den to sleep.

Chapter Six

In the sunrises that followed the Gathering, Silverpaw noticed that Stormpaw had become restless during the nights in their den. Whenever they trained together, she noticed how much harder he drove himself—physically, and mentally, too. He had also started hanging out with Ferrettail and Dawnstrike more, despite the fact that neither of the warriors were his mentor. Normally, Silverpaw would have been upset with how little her brother talked to her, but considering the circumstances she found herself worried about him instead.

Across the clearing from Silverpaw, Mintwillow sat next to Newtsplash, though neither of the mollies uttered a word. The dark silver-and-white tabby that was her mother mingled with her Clanmates less and less with each passing day, and if Silverpaw had to guess, she'd say that Mintwillow had grown wary of them all after the almost-embarrassing event that followed the Gathering. Similarly, Silverpaw had become more and more wary each day. She didn't fail to notice how some of her Clanmates became tentative around herself and Stormpaw. Regardless, she continued to put up a friendly facade in hopes of reassuring them.

When Silverpaw looked away from her mother, she saw that her mentor approached her, and sat upright when she met his gaze. "Silverpaw, what would you say to a little training today?" Cindertalon mewed once he was within earshot.

"Yeah, sure," Silverpaw chirped after giving the idea a moment of consideration. "That sounds nice. Will it just be us?"

"For now." Though Cindertalon's responses remained as simple as ever, his tone had started taking on a gentler sound to it as time passed.

When the dark grey tom whisked around to lead Silverpaw to the moss-covered training clearing, she thought about how much more attentive he had become in his training. He'd already taught

her countless battle moves and hunting stances, even though she'd barely started her apprenticeship compared to her denmates. Before she knew it, they had arrived in the mossy clearing, and Cindertalon had turned to face her.

"I know I've taught you plenty of offensive moves, so today I'm going to teach you a couple of more defensive moves." When he spoke, he hooked his tail over his back and motioned to the earth below him with his paw. "If your opponent isn't giving you time to recover, you can make your opening with a sand toss. While we don't have sand here, there's plenty of loose soil to toss into your enemy's face. Try it on me."

"Um . . . ." Silverpaw faltered at his last sentence and glanced down at the grainy earth beneath her paws.

"Perhaps you need some incentive." Without so much as a warning, Cindertalon lunged toward her. Silverpaw let out a squeak as she panicked and flung her paw upwards. With it went a shower of earth and moss, flying directly into her mentor's face.

"I'm sorry, Cindertalon!" Silverpaw blurted out quickly when he ducked away and started blinking the soil out of his eyes.

"No, that was very good, Silverpaw," he grunted, sounding proud through his discomfort. Once he finished blinking away the earth, he sat upright and shook out his fur.

"Doesn't that hurt?" the apprentice worriedly asked after a heartbeat of silence.

"Sure, but a good warrior learns to endure the pain," Cindertalon responded slowly, as if he were contemplating his words carefully. "Besides, I've faced far worse hardships before joining the Clan."

Silverpaw quickly grew embarrassed when she realized she'd forgotten her mentor's past. "Oh, right. S-Sorry." *A warrior learns to endure the pain?* she echoed in her mind, staring at her mentor curiously. *Is he trying to help me with more than just warrior training?* She knew that the entire Clan had seen the argument between Thistlestar and Mintwillow, and they'd certainly all heard of what

happened at the Gathering.

Cindertalon fell silent for a few moments, staring at Silverpaw's fur with a thoughtful look in his eyes. "Your pelt is light," he commented after an awkward silence. "If there's ever an enemy in our territory, you'll be one of the first to be spotted against the darker tones of our territory. Luckily, sneaking itself won't be much of an issue due to the layers of old pine needles that cover the earth, but you'll need to learn how to stay hidden." Without further instruction, Cindertalon waved his tail to some nearby patches of undergrowth.

Silverpaw gave her mentor, and then the bushes, a skeptical glance as she padded up to them. For a few moments she stared at the vegetation in front of her, letting Cindertalon's words soak into the deepest recesses of her mind. Once more, she glanced at Cindertalon before delicately padding into the thicker parts of plant life. She crouched low, letting the tall ferns cover her body and hide her from sight.

"Excellent," Cindertalon's praise rang into the air, and Silverpaw padded sheepishly out of the undergrowth. "You're a natural at stealth, just like Rookpaw!"

"I'll probably never be as good as he is, though!" Silverpaw reeled when Cindertalon compared her to his son. The dark-furred apprentice was notorious for moving around without making a sound, often sneaking up their Clanmates in casual settings. Most were unsettled by his quiet demeanor, which Silverpaw found amusing.

"Oh, nonsense. You just need some practice!" Cindertalon fixed Silverpaw with an encouraging gaze, which vanished behind a screen of mischief when the sound of a twig snapping indicated they had Clanmates approaching the clearing. "Go on and practice some more."

"Right now?" Silverpaw asked, tilting her head. "Shouldn't we wait for—"

"Yes, right now. Go on!" Cindertalon nudged her toward the

bushes, and just as Silverpaw hid herself, she saw Cricketpaw tumble into the clearing with Dovesong close behind him. "Greetings, Dovesong, Cricketpaw." She grimaced at her mentor's awkward words, but to her surprise, their Clanmates didn't seem to pick up on it.

"Hey there, Cindertalon," Dovesong purred to him before shooting a playful glance at her apprentice. "Isn't Silverpaw out here with you? Cricketpaw wouldn't stop asking to come train with her. *'Please, aunt Dovesong!'* he kept saying."

"That's not true!" When Cricketpaw fluffed his fur up defensively, Silverpaw found herself holding back what would definitely be an embarrassing snort of laughter.

"Oh, that's too bad," Cindertalon mewed softly, his tone flawlessly mocking disappointment. "Rookpaw and Falconpaw are completing their warrior assessments right now, so it shouldn't be long before we're called back to camp. I'm afraid they won't have much time to train together."

"That's true. Where is Silverpaw, anyways?" Silverpaw saw Dovesong crane her head around, and ducked further against the soft ground.

"You know, I had actually turned away for half a heartbeat, and when I looked back she was just gone." Cindertalon's tail stayed hooked over his back as he padded toward the newcomers and away from Silverpaw's hiding spot. "Cricketpaw, could you help me look for her?"

"Sure!" Cricketpaw chirped as he started sniffing around the clearing.

"Last I saw, she was over that way." Silverpaw tried to hide better when she saw her mentor motion in her direction.

Once Cricketpaw neared her, Silverpaw leaped out of her cover towards him. He let out a startled shout and fell away from her before bursting into surprised laughter. Silverpaw joined in on the laughter for only a few moments, nudging her friend back to his

paws.

"Do you think we have time to get training in?" Dovesong asked suddenly, her muzzle lifted toward the sun.

Beside the grey tabby, Cindertalon followed her gaze and flicked his tail. "Well, we probably could, but we'd be better safe than sorry. I only came out here to give Silverpaw a few short lessons—they can always train together back at the camp, though."

Dovesong agreed with only a shrug and turned to lead them all back towards the camp. Once inside, the warrior wasted no time in singling out her friends in the camp, leaving the rest to their own devices. Cindertalon gave Silverpaw a meaningful glance before he padded across the clearing to speak with Wrenfeather.

"Hey, Silv, instead of sparring, d'you want to just eat with me?" Cricketpaw asked quietly from beside Silverpaw. "I mean, we probably won't have much time to train—Rookpaw and Falconpaw have been gone for a while."

"Sure," Silverpaw responded quickly as her stomach growled, reminding her that she had yet to eat that day. "The fresh-kill pile looks full, too!" As she took a few pawsteps toward it, Cricketpaw rushed forward and reached a paw out in her way.

"Go pick a nice spot, I'll get the prey for us!" he insisted before trotting toward the pile of food. Silverpaw shrugged and looked around for a comfy spot to eat, feeling her spirits perk up when she saw a patch of grass that was free of the brittle pine needles. Cricketpaw returned to her as soon as she settled in the spot she chose for them, setting a vole at her paws and a thrush at his own.

"Oh, my favorite!" Silverpaw purred as she dug into her meal without a second thought. Cricketpaw quickly settled beside her and started eating his thrush. Every so often, they'd offer a few words to each other; when it became silent, it was just as comfortable.

"You know, my mom told me something weird the other day," he suddenly murmured around a mouthful of food. "At first I thought it

was silly, but now I dunno."

"What was it?" Silverpaw mewed curiously, tilting her head as she spoke. Newtsplash was never one for weird sayings or comments—when they were all in the nursery, the tortoiseshell molly was often straightforward with her words, even when she was being playful.

Cricketpaw paused and scrunched his face up a bit as he tried to recall what his mother had said. "She said that if you watch the sunset through the trees *every night* for a few moons, your true love would return your feelings. It was kind of out of nowhere, though . . . what do you think of that?"

"*Every night?*" Silverpaw echoed, resisting the urge to giggle at the brown tom's words. "That sounds pretty silly. It seems like a lot of time that could have been spent actually romancing a cat!"

"Heh, yeah," Cricketpaw agreed, though his voice was a little quieter. "There's no way either of us would fall for such a dumb rumor!"

When they were nearly finished with their meals, Rookpaw and Falconpaw bounded into the camp. The two toms looked exhausted as their mentors followed them into the clearing and padded to the leader's den, each of them looking satisfied. When Ferrettail passed by Silverpaw, she caught an inquisitive glance that he threw towards her. The action was so brief that she thought she might have imagined it.

"Hey, Silverpaw!" Silverpaw turned her head when she heard Stormpaw call to her. The dark grey tom started padding toward her quickly, seemingly exiting a conversation he had been having with Dawnstrike. As Silverpaw sat up to address her brother—and to question why he was hanging around the irritable molly, she saw Thistlestar leap up the boulders above his den and onto the root they were wedged next to.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather before the Highroot!" her uncle called, his voice echoing around the camp. The white-furred tom hardly waited before he started his

announcement, not that he needed to, considering most cats were already present. "Not long ago, Ferrettail and Sandfoot reported back to me and confirmed that these fine young cats are indeed ready for their warrior names. Today, their warrior assessments further proved that they're prepared. Falconpaw, Rookpaw, step forward, please."

Once the two brothers stepped forward, Thistlestar looked down on them and continued his speech. "I, Thistlestar, leader of NightClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to watch over these apprentices. They have trained hard to understand the code we uphold, and I commend them each to you as a warrior in their turn. Falconpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to defend and protect your Clanmates, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do." While Silverpaw watched her denmate respond, she noticed that beneath his fluffy fur, he was shaking with excitement.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Falconpaw, from this moment on, you'll be known as Falconwing. StarClan honors your strength and dedication, and we welcome you as a full member of NightClan."

Thistlestar paused to raise his muzzle toward the sun, an action that Falconwing mimicked. The clearing erupted into a brief cheer for the new warrior before quieting down when Thistlestar turned to Rookpaw.

"Rookpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to defend and protect your Clanmates, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do." Rookpaw's voice was as steady as ever, and Silverpaw wondered how he could stay so calm during such an important moment.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Rookpaw, from this moment on, you'll be known as Rookshade. StarClan honors your loyalty and sense of stealth, and we welcome you as a full member of NightClan." Once again, Thistlestar raised his nose to the sky, and Rookshade copied his movement.

"Rookshade! Falconwing!" When the Clan erupted into cheers again, Silverpaw reared up onto her hindlegs to chime in. She noticed that beside her, Cricketpaw was watching the newest warriors with admiration in his brilliant amber eyes. Swiftly, the fluffy silver-point molly dropped to all fours and nudged her denmate.

"That'll be you soon enough!" she reminded him happily.

"I sure hope so!" the brown tabby responded anxiously. "It's only been a few moons, but it feels like so much longer than that."

Suddenly, Stormpaw walked past them, and Silverpaw remembered that he had called to her before the ceremony. "Hey, Stormpaw, did you need something?"

"Oh, uh, no, not really," Stormpaw stammered, stopping in his tracks. "I was just wondering if you wanted to get some extra training in. Dawnstrike said that she and Ferrettail can help."

Silverpaw hesitated, glancing in the direction of the two warriors across the clearing. "I don't know, Stormpaw. They aren't our mentors."

"Well, Wrenfeather barely has time to actually train me, so I was just wondering," Stormpaw snapped suddenly, bristling defensively before trotting off to join the warriors he mentioned.

"S-Sorry! Maybe next time . . . !" Silverpaw called weakly as she watched her brother rush off. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a familiar feathery white tail disappear around the bend of the massive tree that rested near the back center wall of the camp. Silently, she rose to her paws and padded toward the tree, her ears perked curiously. It wasn't normal for Thistlestar to display such clandestine behavior in their own camp; then again, Silverpaw had quickly discovered that it was even weirder for her uncle to lose his temper at a Gathering.

"Silverpaw?" Cricketpaw's worried voice sounded from behind her, and Silverpaw raised her tail to silence him. The closer she got to the bend, the more she could make out angry, yet hushed voices.

"Mintwillow, I don't *care* if you think they look like him," Thistlestar was hissing quietly. "They deserve to know the truth more than anybody in the Clan!"

"Thistle, I can't do this." Silverpaw heard her mother's broken voice as she crouched around the corner of a winding root, careful not to scuff her paws around. The words the siblings uttered sparked a strange feeling inside of Silverpaw, one that she wasn't sure she could contain should it worsen. As if on cue, her heart started to pound in her chest. At first, it was so slight that she hadn't noticed it, but it quickly grew painful as the conversation continued.

Thistlestar gave a defeated sigh before responding. "You can't run from your problems forever. I've done everything I can to make sure they know the love of a parent they don't have, and StarClan knows I'll *never* stop loving them as if they were my own, but you —" Suddenly, he broke off as raw anger seeped into his voice.

"W-What?" Mintwillow's voice was soft and timid, the molly sounding smaller than Silverpaw had ever heard a cat sound.

"Everyone can see what you're doing to them, Mintwillow—they act like they're embarrassed to even exist right now. Do you have *any* idea how much you've already hurt them? Are you even sorry?" Silverpaw jumped when she heard Thistlestar strike his paw against the tree, the sound of his claws raking into the bark echoing softly off the back of the camp. Luckily, no other cat was near enough to hear it.

"Of course I am!" Mintwillow gasped, sounding hurt by her brother's words. "They're my kits!"

"Then you should act like it." Thistlestar's voice verged on what sounded like a snarl before quieting down again.

"Thistlestar, please—"

"No, Mintwillow." The NightClan leader inhaled a deep breath before speaking more calmly. "You've made your nest. If you won't tell them, I will."

Suddenly, Thistlestar was storming out from behind the massive tree, and Silverpaw swiftly ducked out of sight. She pressed herself against the towering tree roots as she waited for Mintwillow to pass. Even after the dark silver tabby was long gone, Silverpaw remained frozen. *We look like . . . him?* she thought as she stared straight ahead, not looking at anything in particular. *Our father? Who was he to them, and why won't she just tell us?*

"Silverpaw?" She started as Cricketpaw whispered her name worriedly, ducking in front of her to catch her attention. Silverpaw blinked and held her denmate's gaze, not sure what to say at first.

"I– um . . . that . . . sounded really bad," she whispered slowly, realizing how confused she sounded as she spoke. The apprentice quickly tried to hide her emotions, though it was clear that Cricketpaw saw right through her guard this time.

"Hey, it'll be okay," Cricketpaw assured her quickly, shuffling around to press comfortingly against her. "Thistlestar will do what's best for you—my dad says he always knows how to do the right thing, even when others won't."

Silverpaw could only muster up a soft nod as a flash of black fur caught her eye. When she looked up, she saw Rookshade padding away from the tree and toward Stormpaw, his tail held unusually low. *Did he hear that, too?* she wondered cautiously when she saw him whisper something to her brother. The mixture of anger and shock that made its way onto Stormpaw's face told her everything she needed to know, and soon enough, the dark grey apprentice was staring across the camp toward his sister.

Quickly, Silverpaw distanced herself from Cricketpaw and forced a cheerful expression onto her face. *If he thinks I didn't hear it, maybe he won't be so upset,* she thought. When he finally looked away, Silverpaw felt herself instinctively release a sigh of relief and let her weary gaze travel across the camp. Even though it had been little more than a half moon, her apprenticeship was proving to be more than she bargained for. Every day seemed to bring with it new, confusing emotions that she had no idea how to manage. Suddenly, all Silverpaw wanted to do was curl up in her nest and sleep her problems away.

Chapter Seven

Ever since the Gathering, it had become increasingly hard to sleep—even moreso since Rookshade had told Stormpaw about the argument between Thistlestar and Mintwillow. Stormpaw let out a frustrated sigh as he lay awake in his nest. The chill of the night had already started creeping into the den, but even the cold wasn't enough to pull him into a slumber. Around him, he could hear the deep, slow breaths of his denmates. Since Falconwing and Rookshade had left the den, Wasppaw had moved his nest to a secluded corner, away from the rest of them. Cricketpaw had started sleeping closer to Silverpaw, and Stormpaw made sure to keep an eye on the brown tabby tom.

As he let his thoughts wander to his denmates, Stormpaw finally felt the tendrils of sleep start to creep over his body, gripping at him until he sank further into his nest. Right as he was about to drift into slumber at last, he felt something wet seeping into the fur of his paws. Stormpaw tried flicking what at first seemed to be water from his paws, and when the mucky substance only stuck to his toes, he snapped his eyes open and sat up.

Instead of seeing the familiar walls of the apprentices' den, he saw dark trees with slimy moss covering their trunks. Their branches drooped down from a blackened, starless sky, their leaves dangling threateningly overhead. Dark, murky water covered Stormpaw's lower legs, and when he lifted one of his paws, the substance made a sickly sucking sound, as if it were trying to keep him rooted there.

When he heard the sound of another cat walking through the sludge, and saw the swaying of undergrowth, Stormpaw froze and tensed his body. He didn't know where he was, or if the approaching cat would be friendly towards him, but he was sure he'd be ready to defend himself despite his current predicament. Moments later a pair of towering ferns parted, and Stormpaw prepared to leap toward the stranger; instead, he found himself

faltering.

In front of him sat a slender tabby molly, her pale fur offering a remarkable contrast to the dark forest that surrounded them. The tip of her tail bobbed with amusement as she fixed her gaze on Stormpaw, though she didn't utter a word.

"Who are you?" Stormpaw finally asked after a few heartbeats.

"A friend," she responded simply, her green eyes straying from Stormpaw to examine the tree she sat next to.

Stormpaw eyed her for a moment, feeling suspicion rise in his chest. "Okay, then. What is this place?"

"A place where you can become strong." She snapped her eyes back to Stormpaw, and he quickly felt like her stare was burning holes into his pelt.

The apprentice only let out a hum in response and, slowly, he let his gaze take a second glance around the forest. Even though the sky here bore no sign of the stars that made up Silverpelt, he noticed that the water, the moss, and even the trees held the faintest of shimmers.

"You've been hurting," the molly mewed suddenly, her voice demanding Stormpaw's attention again.

"What do you know about it?" he retorted perhaps a bit too guardedly. Stormpaw eyed the stranger in front of him, wondering who she was and what she could possibly want from him.

"Oh, too much." This time, she let out a long, weary sigh and wrapped her tail around her paws.

"H-Have you been hurting, too?" Stormpaw asked slowly, analyzing the molly carefully. He tried putting the pieces together in his mind as he did so, but he couldn't seem to figure out anything about this weird place—or the weird she-cat in front of him.

"Mhm," she hummed thoughtfully, her striking green gaze staying trained on Stormpaw. "I've been hurting for a long, long

time now, but you learn to cope with the pain." *You learn to cope?* he latched onto her words quickly and leaned forward, eager to find out what she meant.

"How?" he whispered curiously, his round eyes locked onto her. "How do you do that?"

The hint of a smirk played at the molly's expression, but it was gone as soon as it had appeared. "You want to get stronger, don't you? To protect your sister?"

"Yeah, of course!" Stormpaw perked up for a moment before his suspicions rose up again. "How do you know about that, though? Wait, are you a StarClan cat?"

"Am I—" she started to speak, her eyes widening in surprise as she hesitated. Then, the smirk from before reappeared, and she twitched her whiskers before continuing. "Yes, yes I am. I want to offer you some extra training, young one. It will help you protect your sister, and it'll also help you learn to handle your pain."

"Really? That's awesome!" Stormpaw leapt forward a bit, ignoring the unsettling sound the thick water made beneath his paws. "I'm already getting extra training, so this will be great!"

"Extra training from your mentor?" the molly queried, interest sparking in her gaze.

"No, from a few other cats in the Clan. But you're a StarClan cat, aren't you supposed to be all-knowing?" Stormpaw narrowed his eyes at her when she faltered at his question, though his worries eased when she started laughing.

"No, of course not," she managed between a few chuckles. "That's just a silly rumor. Come along with me, I'll show you where *I* like to train."

The molly whisked around and started padding off into the dark forest, leaving Stormpaw to struggle after her. The water grew thicker the further they padded, sucking at his paws every step of the way while the pale tabby seemed to glide effortlessly through it.

Stormpaw scoffed at the ease of her movement and trudged after her more desperately until they finally reached a patch of dry land.

"After a while, all that mud and nastiness will *really* start to stick," the she-cat commented, watching as Stormpaw started shaking his fur clean. Then, she beckoned him over with a wave of her tail.

"Are we going to train right away?" Stormpaw asked once he was close enough.

The molly nodded and quickly took a swipe at Stormpaw, her green eyes curious as she watched him duck away. "For now, I'll just show you some more advanced techniques. I'd like to start with the underbelly slash—"

"For now?" Stormpaw echoed, tilting his head curiously. "You mean there's more than just . . . advanced moves?"

"Correct." The molly sat down slowly, hardly paying attention to how the apprentice had had interrupted her as she explained further. "After some time—once I decide you're ready—you'll be able to start practicing the moves with your claws unsheathed. If you're anything like you seem, I doubt it will take long."

"Wait, really?" Stormpaw frowned at the idea of training with his claws and thought back to his fight with Wasppaw. "Wrenfeather says to never use your claws during training."

"Who is he, your daddy?" the molly retorted, letting out a snort of mocking laughter. "Besides, it'll only be for here. It isn't like you'll be using it on your Clanmates."

Stormpaw hesitated at her comment before offering a shrug. "Alright, then."

The molly moved to demonstrate the move she had mentioned before pausing, eyeing Stormpaw carefully. He watched her cautiously, still feeling a sense of foreboding despite her reassurances. *Maybe it doesn't matter, though. This is just a dream, after all,* Stormpaw thought to himself. *A dream from* StarClan, *no*

less!

"Little Stormpaw, I can see the stress weighing on your shoulders from here," she spoke after a moment of silence. "What's truly eating at you? Was it something I said? Your father, perhaps?"

"It's just that Wrenfeather is my mentor, not my father," Stormpaw mewed slowly. Suddenly, he felt the urge to confide in the strange tabby, and words started spilling out of him before he could control himself. "I think my father is a rogue, actually. Everyone around me—well, mostly the other Clans, but sometimes even our elders say really mean things about rogue-born cats, and it makes me kind of nervous."

"Why don't you go find him, then?" the molly queried curiously, tilting her head as she held Stormpaw's gaze.

"What?" Stormpaw took a step back and eyed her again. Surely she was joking.

"You heard me." She held up her paw and inspected her claws, which were stained with a dark pigment. "I never knew my father, either. Unless you go out and find him yourself, nothing will change. Do you really think your mother will tell you now, when you're already an apprentice?"

"W-Well actually, my friend said he overheard our leader—my uncle—threatening to tell us himself!" Stormpaw felt himself grow defensive—and nervous—at her idea. *Go find him myself? If the rogues really are trying to start issues with the Clans, is that such a good idea?*

"Leaders always make empty threats," the molly laughed loudly and slammed her paw to the ground with the last syllable, fixing her intense green gaze on Stormpaw again. "Go find those rogues yourself, kit. Maybe then you can get some answers."

"Alright, maybe I will," Stormpaw nodded and glanced over his shoulder. He couldn't help feeling like he was doing something wrong with this molly. "I don't even know where to start, though."

"Keep training with me, and I'll help you. Now, about that move I mentioned . . . ."

The molly fell into a crouch and Stormpaw copied her movements. Their training continued through the night, for longer than Stormpaw could remember. By the time he woke up, his body ached from the training session, and he could see sunlight filtering into the den from the main clearing. Beside him, Silverpaw sat upright, her blue eyes round with worry.

"Stormpaw, are you okay? You kept twitching in your sleep," she murmured softly, glancing around the den even though they were the only two there.

"Yeah, I'm okay." Stormpaw sat up slowly and blinked the sleep out his eyes. Stifling a yawn, he asked, "How late is it?"

"Not very; Wrenfeather hasn't even sorted the patrols yet. C'mon, let's go see what we're doing today."

Stormpaw rose to his paws wordlessly, his eyes locked onto his sister's form. Even though her voice sounded friendly, there was something off about her. It was a strange edge, as if she were close to breaking down. He could see it in her eyes, too—a dangerous, dark glint that Stormpaw could almost feel.

"Silver, are you alright?" he asked carefully, feeling worry spark inside him.

"Me? Of course I am!" Silverpaw jumped to her paws and started trotting out of the den. "Come on!"

Though his gut told him it was a lie, Stormpaw remained silent and trailed after his sister. While he walked, he noticed that the ache from his training lingered. With each step, his muscles screamed in protest to his movements. Once out of the den, he saw that Wrenfeather was nearly halfway across the camp and bit back a sigh of dismay. *If I'm going to accept all this extra training, I'll have to get used to this,* he told himself as he trudged over to his mentor with Silverpaw.

"Nice to see you two join us," Wrenfeather called to them as they approached, amusement twinkling in his eyes. "Stormpaw, you'll be with myself, Ferrettail, and Sandfoot for the sunhigh border patrol. Dawnstrike, you'll lead the sunrise hunting patrol with Cindertalon, Silverpaw, and Rookshade. Dovesong, I want you leading the sunset border patrol with Cricketpaw, Falconwing, and Daisynose."

Wrenfeather continued listing off the patrols while Stormpaw watched him closely. One by one, he listed off the names of their campmates, assigning them each to a patrol or a camp duty. He noticed how Wrenfeather didn't mention Mintwillow, and when he looked around, he saw her dark silver tail vanishing into the warriors' den. Just outside said den stood Ferrettail, the brown-and-white tom's gaze locked on Stormpaw.

When Stormpaw met Ferrettail's stare, the warrior started to saunter over to him. "Say, Stormpaw," he mewed slowly, his voice low, "have you ever found rogue-scent before?"

"Uh . . . ." Stormpaw hesitated and let his gaze travel to Falconwing and Icepaw by the medicine den before deciding that they didn't count—the family been in the Clan long enough to lose whatever *'rogue-scent'* Ferrettail talked about. "No, I don't think so."

"Alright, while we're on patrol, keep your nose open for unfamiliar scents," Ferrettail instructed, his whiskers twitching with what looked like amusement. "If I find a trace, I'll let you know first."

"O-Okay, sure!" Stormpaw nodded quickly and watched Ferrettail pad off towards Dawnstrike, who sat with Daisynose and Dovesong.

"Why's he so interested in you?" Stormpaw jumped nearly a tail length into the air when Rookshade spoke up beside him.

"You have *got* to stop doing that," Stormpaw murmured, giving his friend a sideways glance. "I don't really know why he seems so interested, though. A while ago he said he understands more than I realize, which seemed kind of weird, but I think maybe he relates to me. He and Dawnstrike offered me extra training, too—I accepted,

since Wrenfeather gets a bit busy sometimes."

"Hm." Rookshade watched Ferrettail curiously before turning to Stormpaw. "I have to leave for my patrol, but I'll see if Dawnstrike knows anything. I know they've become closer recently."

"Thanks, Rookshade." Stormpaw nodded to the black-furred warrior as he padded off, and watched as Dawnstrike joined him, alongside Silverpaw and her mentor.

Once the hunting patrol departed, Stormpaw trudged to the edge of the clearing and let himself get comfortable. He had plenty of time before sunhigh came, with almost nothing to do. Wasppaw had gotten the short end of the stick and was tending to the elders, and Stormpaw knew better than to offer his help to the golden tom.

While he waited, Stormpaw let his gaze travel around the clearing and saw Thistlestar approaching Wrenfeather. His uncle waited for Wrenfeather to dismiss the rest of their Clanmates before the two toms stepped over toward their leader's den. The dark grey apprentice eyed the two cats, noticing how they sat with their backs facing their Clan. His thoughts flashed briefly to Rookshade, and how the dark-furred tom always managed to hear and see everything within the camp's walls without being seen.

Stormpaw slowly rose to his paws and tried to mimic his friend's mannerisms—surely if he could move like Rookshade, he could become a shadow, too. He tried to let his body glide along silently, willing himself to become weightless. Slowly, he crept across the camp until he could finally make out what Thistlestar was saying, which was—

"Stormpaw, I don't even have to turn around to know you're there."

His uncle's words made him start, and his ears quickly burned with shame when Thistlestar and Wrenfeather turned to face him. Stormpaw shuffled his paws anxiously as the white-furred leader padded up to him, though his eyes were anything but scolding.

"What's all this about, Stormy?" The warmth in Thistlestar's

voice as he used the old nickname for his nephew reassured him, and he let out a sigh.

"I was just . . ." Stormpaw hesitated, glancing at his mentor before continuing. "I was just trying to copy Rookshade. He's always so quiet, you know? I wanted to see if I could be the same way."

Thistlestar gave him a disbelieving look and glanced over his shoulder at Wrenfeather. "Would you give us a moment? Don't worry, I won't keep him from his patrol."

"Of course, Thistlestar." Wrenfeather bowed his head before trotting off. Stormpaw watched as he made his way to Newtsplash and, who was resting in a patch of sunlight and watching Wasppaw trudge in and out of the elders' den. He noticed how the deputy's mate perked up at his approach. Stormpaw felt a pang of jealousy thorn at his chest as he watched them, and thought of his own mother and, very briefly, his unknown father.

"Stormpaw, let's take a walk," Thistlestar coaxed him suddenly. When Stormpaw only sent him a wary glance, he sighed and padded toward his den. "At least come over this way. We should talk without curious ears."

"What is there to talk about?" Stormpaw muttered, though he followed him toward the towering boulders.

"You're angry," Thistlestar commented, avoiding his nephew's question. "You've every right to be upset—"

"What do you know about it?" Stormpaw snapped suddenly and stopped dead in his tracks. He wanted his uncle to admit that he knew about it all the entire time—he wanted at least one of the cats who raised him to be honest with him.

"I know plenty, Stormpaw. Come here." When Thistlestar swept his tail across the earth beside him, Stormpaw slowly padded over and sat down. "You know that whatever happens, I'll always be your uncle, Stormpaw. Silverpaw will always be your sister, and Mintwillow will always be your mother—your family will never change."

"Why are you saying that as if something's going to happen?" When Stormpaw looked up at his uncle, he saw a faraway look in his amber eyes. "Why can't she just tell us why she's doing this? Or who our father is?"

"You don't need a father to be happy—"

"No, but I *want* to know, and I deserve to." Stormpaw scooted away from him angrily. "It's pretty obvious that he was some rogue, I'm not stupid. I've also seen how other cats talk about rogues—not just other Clans, either. Even the elders will talk badly about rogue-born cats! Vinecrawl did, even though *she* had a rogue for a mate, too!"

"You're not rogue-born," Thistlestar reminded him gently, his eyes now fixated on the grey apprentice.

"Then why does it still hurt when they say those things? Why does it make me so angry?" Stormpaw lowered his head and flattened his ears, not wanting his uncle to see how upset he was. At first, Thistlestar was quiet, and then he let out a soft, sad sigh.

"Look, I—" The grey-footed tom hesitated, sounding as if he were struggling with his words for once. "I promised Mintwillow that I would give her time to explain everything to you two. Stormpaw, I know it won't make up for the pain she's already caused you, but I know Mintwillow well enough to say that she's only ever done what she thought was best."

That final sentence filled Stormpaw with an inexplicable anger, but he swallowed it down as he glanced at Thistlestar. "She's ignored us or brushed us off since the day we became apprentices without so much as a warning. How could that be the best option for her?"

Thistlestar held Stormpaw's angry gaze, his amber eyes unreadable. "If Mintwillow fails to explain things, I promise to fill in the blanks where I can." Then, he cast his gaze toward the camp entrance, which rustled noisily to announce the return of the morning patrols. "The sunhigh border patrol will be departing soon, make sure not to be late."

As Thistlestar padded away, Stormpaw looked toward the bramble tunnel as the patrols entered the camp. Silverpaw was the first to enter, looking a bit crestfallen with a robin and a small mouse hanging from her jaws. When he saw that the rest of her patrol each carried two or three sizable catches, Stormpaw felt a bit of pity, but he didn't have any time to console his sister.

Wrenfeather was standing by the camp entrance already with Ferrettail and Sandfoot at either side. The deputy waved his tail to Stormpaw impatiently and, once his apprentice bounded over, they immediately set out into the forest. The golden-dappled tom tried to set a faster pace than usual, and as Stormpaw struggled to keep up, he noticed that Ferrettail had taken up a more-than-leisurely pace. Sandfoot stayed closer to Wrenfeather, but every once in the while, Stormpaw caught the pale orange warrior glancing over his shoulder at his Clanmates.

"Psst, Stormpaw!" They hadn't even neared the SwiftClan border when Ferrettail called him back quietly. When he glanced over his shoulder, Stormpaw could barely make out his brown-and-white figure through the undergrowth.

Stormpaw hesitated, sending a wary glance toward the other two toms before stepping backward toward Ferrettail. "Uh . . . yes?"

"What do you smell here?" the warrior asked simply, nudging Stormpaw further into the undergrowth and pointing at a patch of beaten-down foliage. Stormpaw stepped forward toward it slowly and leaned forward, detecting a vaguely familiar scent.

"I . . . d-don't know, actually," he murmured quietly, wracking his brain for a reason he'd recognize the smell. "What is it?"

"Do you recognize it?" Ferrettail pressed, his whiskers twitching curiously.

"I think so?" Stormpaw leaned back and frowned a bit. "I'm not sure. We should get Wrenfeather, it could be rogues—"

"It is," Ferrettail cut him off and quickly offered a nonchalant shrug. "Don't get worried, though. The scent is old, so there's really

no need to inform Wrenfeather. I just wanted to see if you could detect it."

Without another word, Ferrettail bounded away from Stormpaw and caught back up to their patrol. Stormpaw slowly followed after him, feeling a bit troubled at the fact that they had found rogue-scent in their territory, and even more troubled at the fact that Ferrettail had said not to tell Wrenfeather. When he caught up, he heard the warrior excusing his absence by saying the apprentice had gotten his paw tangled in some vines. *Maybe it's all part of that extra training he offered,* Stormpaw told himself, feeling a bit reassured by his own thoughts. *That makes sense. Wrenfeather probably already knows about the rogue-scent—telling him again would have been a waste of time!*

Even though he tried to dismiss his worries, Stormpaw still felt a bit off about it all. He tried blaming it on his exhaustion from his strange dream, or his anger toward his mother, but it just didn't seem to add up. Surely his Clanmates wouldn't hide traces of rogue activity from the deputy—no, not without good reason to.

Chapter Eight

"Hey, Silverpaw!" Cricketpaw called as he approached the fluffy silver-point molly. "I caught you a vole!" Silverpaw started at his voice and turned to face the brown tabby tom, trying to contain her happiness at his presence.

"Oh, thank you, Cricketpaw!" she purred gratefully before growing a bit sheepish when he dropped the rodent at her paws. "I wish I could have gotten you something in return, though. I'm not very good at hunting."

Cricketpaw let out a soft laugh as he sat next to Silverpaw, though he didn't have food of his own. "You don't ever have to get me anything, you know. I never expect anything in return."

"I'll find something for you," Silverpaw promised quietly before nudging the vole towards him. "Would you like to share it?"

"Silverpaw!" Before Cricketpaw could offer a response, Wrenfeather called her from beneath the Highroot. Silverpaw shot Cricketpaw a confused look as she approached the deputy slowly. "You'll be attending the sunset border patrol with Mintwillow and Stormpaw."

"Wait, what?" Silverpaw froze in her tracks, shocked at the order. "Just . . . us? What about Cindertalon? Or *you?"* She'd never been ordered onto a patrol without her mentor—none of the other apprentices had. Even more surprising was the fact that her mother would be the only warrior on the patrol.

"It's Thistlestar's orders," Wrenfeather responded simply, glancing around the apprentice to his son. "Go on back to your meal."

Silverpaw hesitated before obeying, and when she returned to Cricketpaw, she saw that he hadn't touched her vole. "What did my dad want?" he asked, his brilliant amber eyes wide with curiosity.

"He switched up a few of the patrols," Silverpaw murmured, settling back down and taking a bite of the prey at her paws. "I guess I'm on the sunset patrol now."

"That's weird," Cricketpaw murmured, inching closer to her. "He doesn't usually change the daily schedule like that—especially not so late into the day." He turned his head upward, and Silverpaw followed his gaze to see how high the sun rested in the sky.

She heard the sound of paws scuffling across the clearing and when she lowered her gaze, Silverpaw saw that Stormpaw had approached them. His jade-colored eyes were fixated on Cricketpaw, seemingly saying something to him that Silverpaw didn't understand.

"I'll talk to you later, Silverpaw," Cricketpaw mewed suddenly. Silverpaw frowned as her friend stood and trotted over to where Wasppaw sat with Falconwing, the two toms deep in conversation.

Then, she turned back to her brother, who had fixed her with an expectant gaze. "Why'd you have to chase Cricketpaw off? We were talking."

"Wrenfeather wants us to go on the sunset patrol with Mintwillow," Stormpaw ignored the question and flicked his long-furred tail as he spoke their mother's name.

"Yeah, he told me," Silverpaw responded with a sigh and looked away.

"We should probably be ready for her to explain her actions," Stormpaw continued, his tone sounding flatter than usual. Silverpaw frowned at the sound of it and turned to him again, her eyebrows furrowed with worry.

"Hey, Stormpaw."

"What is it?"

Silverpaw took a deep breath before speaking again. "No matter what happens, we'll always be best friends, right?" She looked at him hopefully as his green eyes grew round with shock.

"Of course!" he gasped at the suggestion that they could ever grow apart. "We won't let what Mintwillow is doing drive us apart. Besides Thistlestar, we're each other's only family now."

"There's Mistypool and Daisynose, too," Silverpaw reminded him of their grandmother and her sister quickly, glancing at their figures across the camp. Daisynose was lying down, looking winded while Mistypool curled around the cream-and-grey molly comfortingly.

Stormpaw shrugged as he followed her gaze. "I mean, they don't really talk to us much, either. They never really did. Rookshade told me it doesn't matter, though—we'll make more family without them."

"You're right," Silverpaw mewed softly and looked up at the sun as it slowly sunk towards the horizon. "We're each other's best friends. Nobody understands us like we do." She purred, growing happy as she nudged Stormpaw with her paw.

"That's right!" Stormpaw nodded quickly, his own eyes lighting up with joy. "When I become leader, you'll be my deputy! My closest ally!"

Silverpaw nearly choked on her vole as she laughed. "Who said I wanted to become the deputy? Maybe I'll be happy as a warrior!"

"Okay, okay, fine," Stormpaw chuckled softly as his eyes strayed across the clearing. "We'll stay best friends, though." Silverpaw followed his gaze and saw that he was watching Cricketpaw and Wasppaw, the two brothers deep in conversation. Wasppaw said something and nudged his darker brother playfully, while Cricketpaw fluffed his fur up indignantly.

"Cricketpaw is a good friend, too, Stormpaw," Silverpaw mewed, feeling fond of the tom. Beside her, she noticed Stormpaw tense, and she narrowed her eyes at him.

"I don't know." Finally, Stormpaw looked away from their denmates and instead fixated his gaze on another group of cats—Rookshade and Icepaw, joined by Falconwing as he left Wasppaw's side. "I know we've been denmates with him for our whole lives, but

you could get hurt, Silver."

"Isn't that just part of life?" Silverpaw murmured, tilting her head at her brother's words.

Stormpaw only eyed her for a moment before rising to his paws again. "We should get ready for our patrol." With that final, curt sentence, he padded off to join Rookshade and his siblings. Once there, Stormpaw leaned forward and whispered something to the black-furred tom, who merely flicked an ear in response.

Silverpaw let out a soft sigh and rolled her eyes at her brother's prickly behavior. She finished her vole in silence as she watched the sun start to set, realizing that with the shorter days of leaf-fall their patrol would be approaching fast. Soon enough, Mintwillow appeared out of the warriors' den and padded wordlessly toward the camp entrance. She hardly waited for her kits as they rushed over and padded out into the forest.

The dark silver-and-white warrior was quiet as she led the small patrol through the territory. The only sound coming from her was that of her paws against the dried, dead layer of leaves that accumulated on the forest floor. Silverpaw stayed silent, occasionally exchanging an uneasy glance with Stormpaw, who looked like he had something to say. *Please don't say anything rude,* she pleaded quietly. When he finally opened his mouth to speak, her heart dropped to her stomach.

"I heard Dovesong say she found faint traces of rogue activity in the territory a few sunrises ago," Stormpaw commented slowly. Silverpaw held back a sigh of relief at his passive tone.

"Do you think they're going to try and cause trouble?" Silverpaw murmured curiously, though she kept one eye on Mintwillow.

Stormpaw shrugged and glanced at the passing undergrowth that thinned as the neared the SwiftClan border. "Ferrettail says the scents are so faint that they can't be looking to cause issues. It's weird, though. They said it's almost as if they just appear in the center of our territory without any distinguished trails."

"That doesn't make any sense!" Silverpaw whispered, growing suspicious. *There's no way they could just* appear *in our territory like that!*

"Rogues are tricky," Mintwillow suddenly mewed over her shoulder, her voice tense. "Don't you ever trust them, either." Silverpaw and Stormpaw exchanged a surprised glance before the latter's eyes darkened angrily.

"You did," he shot back, his tone almost sounding taunting.

"Stormpaw!" Silverpaw hissed, shocked at his sudden anger. In front of them, Mintwillow had frozen. Her only movement was the tip of her tail as it bobbed erratically above the ground.

"It was a mistake," Mintwillow snapped, spinning around to face them. Regret filled her green eyes, and Silverpaw suddenly felt bad for her anger towards their mother, though it wasn't enough to mask the spear that tore painfully through her heart. "I—"

"You don't mean that." Though she tried, Silverpaw couldn't keep the pain from her voice as she stared at the cat that had once raised them so lovingly. "Thistlestar ordered this patrol for a reason. I know he wants you to tell us the truth, but you're just trying to push us away."

"Don't be ridiculous." Mintwillow rolled her eyes and spun away from the apprentices, padding further along the border.

"Yeah, it's ridiculous." Beside Silverpaw, Stormpaw copied his mother's movements, though his head was low as they padded forward. "Clearly, *you're* just a sour old molly who—"

"Stormpaw, stop it!" Silverpaw hissed loudly. She paused for a moment, and as she continued she struggled to keep her voice low. "Mother, I heard you and Thistlestar the other day. You said we look like *him* —obviously you meant our father, but I don't understand why that's such an issue for you. We *aren't* him. We don't even know who he is!"

"You don't understand," Mintwillow snapped over her shoulder.

"How could you? You're still practically kits!"

"Then help us understand!" Silverpaw begged, bounding forward a few whisker-lengths. "Talk to us instead of just pushing us away."

At that, Mintwillow faltered in her step, and Silverpaw could see the hint of a pained expression on her muzzle. "Okay, fine, just . . . keep walking with me. We aren't out here just so that we can talk. We have a patrol to finish."

Silverpaw and Stormpaw exchanged a glance as they kept padding after her. To the right, the vast moorlands of SwiftClan stretched out in the fading sunlight.

Mintwillow let out a deep sigh before speaking again. "I met him when I was a younger warrior. Things with the rogues weren't so . . . tense back then. He was handsome, and he was charming, and he looked . . . just like you two do. You've both got the same long, silky fur, and I can already see you two growing just as big."

"Stormpaw and I don't really look that similar aside from what you said, though," Silverpaw murmured, glancing at her dark-furred brother.

"Maybe not in fur color, but he's striped the same way you two are," Mintwillow glanced back over her shoulder briefly. "Silverpaw, you look much more like him than Stormpaw does. Especially your eyes . . . ."

"Well, what happened?" Stormpaw pressed, a hint of anger still lingering in his voice.

Mintwillow hesitated again, her tail twitching as she thought of her past. "I wanted him to join the Clan so that we could be together—especially when I found out I was expecting you two. Unfortunately, he had other plans."

"Like what?" Silverpaw breathed, feeling more sympathy for her mother with every word.

"He didn't exactly support our ways of life. He wanted me to go with him, to the Twolegplace. He always talked about the rogues

there having *'big plans'* for him, and he wanted me to be part of that. When I said I couldn't, he tried saying he wanted the kits—he wanted you two—so I just . . . never talked to him again."

Silverpaw let out a sad gasp at the thought of her mother's broken love. "That's such a tragedy!" she whispered.

Mintwillow let out a sad laugh, and sent a warm but apologetic glance over her shoulder. "Yeah, but I have two amazing kits to show for it." Silverpaw felt her fur grow warm under her mother's praise, but Stormpaw still looked distrustful.

"You sure don't act like it," he muttered sourly. "Maybe we would have been better off with him, at least it seems like he wanted us."

"Stormpaw—" Mintwillow sounded scolding for half a heartbeat before she stopped herself. "I know that I haven't been the greatest toward you since your apprenticeship started, but it's . . . ."

"Complicated." Thistlestar suddenly appeared out of the undergrowth behind them, startling all three cats. Silverpaw turned to her uncle and saw that he looked a bit proud as he gazed at their mother. There was a hint of something else behind that pride, though—something darker that Silverpaw thought might be worry. "Thank you for finally telling them, Mintwillow."

"Of course." Mintwillow halted and turned to face her brother, her green eyes round. "You were right, I should have told them from the start. I just . . . didn't want them to get hurt by what the other Clans might say. I know that Wolfstar is notorious for voicing his feelings for rogue-related cats, but I never thought he'd pick fights like he did. I didn't even know how to begin telling them when all I saw was *him* ."

"They've known for a while now, Minty. I could see it in their eyes whenever a cat made a comment like that." Thistlestar padded toward the apprentices and brushed against them comfortingly. Silverpaw leaned into his warmth happily, watching as he kept his gaze locked to Mintwillow. "Are you still considering . . . ?"

". . . yes." Mintwillow sighed again and turned away, gazing over the land beyond their territory. "I can't say if it will be permanent, but it would help me clear my head."

"Considering what?" Silverpaw chimed in, glancing between the two cats.

Thistlestar stared at Mintwillow sadly before shaking his head. "You know, it's getting pretty late. We should cut the patrol short and return to camp before anyone gets worried." He padded to the head of the group, his tail brushing reassuringly over Silverpaw and Stormpaw's shoulders respectively. Silverpaw kept her mouth shut as they finished their patrol, and beside her, Stormpaw still looked a bit mad. Even though their mother had finally told them the truth and explained why she had distanced herself so suddenly, Silverpaw felt worried. *What could she be planning?*

When they returned to the camp, it was quiet, as most cats had gone to their nests for the evening. Cricketpaw sat outside of the apprentices' den patiently, and when Silverpaw came into sight, he rushed up to her happily.

"Welcome back, Silverpaw!" he purred to her. "Guess what—Dovesong said that she and Mistypool would take me and Wasppaw to Starfalls tomorrow!"

Silverpaw watched her mother and Thistlestar pad off wordlessly as she forced a purr in response to her friend. "That's great, Cricketpaw! Do you think you'll get dreams from StarClan?"

"That would be awesome, but I don't think so." Cricketpaw shuffled his paws meekly, his excitement suddenly ebbing away. "I'm nobody special, I doubt they'd have any interest in me."

"What are you talking about?" Silverpaw scoffed and nudged him affectionately. "You're amazing, Cricketpaw! If anything, StarClan should feel *honored* to speak to you. You better tell me everything that happens, okay?"

"As if I'd let you get away without suffering through every last detail!" Cricketpaw laughed, his eyes lighting up cheerfully in the

dark of the night. "I'll tell you every single bug I spot on the journey, too!"

Silverpaw snorted in amusement and rolled her eyes playfully. "Sure, you will. I'll save a fat thrush for you if you can actually do it!"

"I'll hold you to that. Come on, let's go to our nests. Wasppaw and I have to be up pretty early." Cricketpaw flicked Silverpaw's nose with his tail and rushed off to their den. Silverpaw twitched her whiskers and hurried after him. Once she was resting in her nest, sleep overcame her quickly.

Silverpaw entered her dream faster than usual, and this time it was even more vivid than her other dreams. Around her was a dark forest, the trees slimy with dark crimson moss. Even though she stood on dry land, she could see multiple pools of murky liquid dotting the surrounding forest floor. *What is this place?* she wondered, fighting back a feeling of foreboding that rose in her chest. Something inside her told her she wanted to get out of there as fast as possible, but how could she do that when she didn't even know where *there* was?

Somewhere behind her a twig snapped, and Silverpaw spun around quickly. "Hello? Is someone there?" she called out hesitantly. When there was no response, she padded forward slowly, her gaze darting around.

The towering plants cast shadows across her path, some of them even resembling cats. Every time a shadow twitched at her paws, she jumped and glanced wildly around herself, though she never saw another cat. Silverpaw twitched her tail nervously as she traveled further into the strange forest that was devoid of the sounds of life that filled her waking life. The unusual dream occupied her mind for the entire night, and by the time she woke up, she felt as if she'd lost energy instead of gaining more back.

Chapter Nine

Several sunrises had passed since Mintwillow had told the siblings the truth—most of it, at least. A chill now lingered in the air, biting at Silverpaw's toes as a warning of the arrival of leaf-fall, and soon leafbare. The elder Warblerwing had already come down with a cough and was preemptively moved into the medicine den. Most of her Clanmates seemed uneasy over his symptoms, many of them mentioning the strange illness that had overcome the elders of SwiftClan. Silverpaw shared their worries, of course. Admittedly, though, she was more intrigued by the fact that Ferrettail had barely visited the medicine den despite being Warblerwing's son.

Beside her sat Cricketpaw and Wasppaw, the two brothers chattering to each other and to her. As expected, neither of them had received special dreams at Starfalls. Even though several sunrises had passed, they were both equally mystified by the ancestral pools.

"It's so cool that Icepaw gets to go every half moon, now!" Cricketpaw whispered in awe. "It's like another land entirely!"

"Yeah, it is," Wasppaw nodded quickly. Even the short-tempered tom looked excited for once.

Silverpaw didn't respond. She'd spotted Stormpaw a little ways across the clearing next to Rookshade, and had noticed a nasty-looking scratch hidden beneath his long fur. With every passing day, Stormpaw had seemed to grow more drained, too, just like she had. Silverpaw's dreams in the strange forest continued, though every night she wandered alone. Every morning, she felt like she lost sleep, but somehow she managed to stay light-hearted and kept training diligently when asked, so nobody questioned her exhaustion.

"Do you think Icepaw talks to StarClan every half moon?" Cricketpaw whispered again, his tone hushed.

"I doubt it," Silverpaw murmured, slowly letting her gaze find the grey-and-white molly. "Don't they only visit to deliver messages or omens?" Icepaw was standing beneath the root that formed the entrance to their den with Rowanspots at her side. The older medicine cat was giving swift nods as Icepaw diligently listed off herbs and their usages.

"I'm sure she doesn't speak to those spooky ghosts every time," a new voice spoke up, startling the three apprentices. Silverpaw fluffed her fur up in embarrassment when Daisynose approached them, and though the senior warrior was friendly, she noticed that her breathing sounded ragged and labored.

"Daisynose, are you okay?" Silverpaw mewed hesitantly, growing worried for her great aunt. "It sounds like you're wheezing." She remembered how Thistlestar had been urging Mistypool to retire along with her sister, and wondered if they should have moved to the elders' den by now.

"Of course I am," Daisynose purred, hooking her tail over her back. "This just happens when it gets cold out, so don't even think about worrying about it."

Silverpaw opened her mouth to respond, but the cream-and-grey molly was already trotting off, her sides heaving with the effort. She watched Daisynose leave, growing even more worried.

"I'm sure she's okay, Silverpaw," Cricketpaw murmured reassuringly, tilting his head a bit. "My mother once mentioned how Daisynose always wheezes a bit during leaf-bare, maybe it's just starting early."

"Yeah, you're probably right," Silverpaw sighed softly and looked at her friend. "Do you have any training to do today?"

Suddenly she felt a new presence, and she turned her head to see Rookshade sitting next to the group. "Hello, Silverpaw and friends," he chirped cheerily. Beside Cricketpaw, Wasppaw let out a scoff and stood to leave without a word.

"Uh, hey, Rookshade," Silverpaw responded slowly, glancing at

Cricketpaw. "Stormpaw isn't with us."

"I'm not here for him, though," Rookshade responded, looking a bit confused.

Silverpaw stared at him for a moment before nodding. "Alright, then. Anyways, Cricketpaw, are you training today?"

"No, actually," Cricketpaw responded, happily curling his tail around his paws. "Dovesong let me have the rest of the day off as long as I promised to keep an eye on the elders and Ferrettail."

"Ferrettail?" Silverpaw echoed, feeling uneasy at the mention of the warrior. *He hasn't been acting out, aside from not visiting his father.*

"Dovesong and my father are his cousins, and they said that he's been acting strange lately." Cricketpaw shrugged, his eyes fixated on the warrior. "Even with Warblerwing in the medicine den."

"Strange how?" Silverpaw mewed and followed his gaze, recalling how the warrior had offered Stormpaw extra training.

"He apparently goes to his nest pretty late even though he doesn't have nighttime duties," Cricketpaw shrugged again and flicked the tip of his tail. "Sometimes he'll slip off during border patrols, or come back with less prey during hunting patrols."

Silverpaw mulled over his words for a moment before Rookshade chimed in. "I heard that he and Dawnstrike have been training more to keep themselves occupied. Maybe that's what he's doing?"

"Training . . . just with each other?" Silverpaw asked, giving the black tom a pointed look. She knew she didn't have to elaborate for him to know what she was asking—to know that she was asking if her brother was with them. Then, she thought of Thistlestar, and how her uncle seemed to be stuck as Dawnstrike's target for her anger.

"Yeah, it's only them," Rookshade confirmed, returning Silverpaw's look.

"But why?" Cricketpaw leaned forward curiously. "They're already warriors, they don't need more training."

It was Silverpaw's turn to offer a shrug as she considered the idea of cats training beyond their apprenticeship. "I mean, it *does* sound like they're trying to keep their senses sharp for the Clan. How could anything bad come from that?"

"Yeah," Rookshade quickly agreed. "There's not much harm that extra training could do."

Before they could keep discussing it, the entrance to the camp quivered wildly before with the return of the sunhigh patrol. Once by one, the members streamed into the camp—Falconwing, Newtsplash, Sandfoot, and Dawnstrike. All of them bore minor injuries, and Newtsplash even sported a painful-looking limp. Immediately, the attention of the Clan was on the injured warriors, and Cricketpaw rushed from Silverpaw's side to meet his mother. Silverpaw noticed that Dawnstrike, while her fur was just as disheveled as the rest, was actually unscathed.

"We were attacked by rogues," Falconwing called loudly, his voice echoing around the camp. "We fought them off, but we have some bad news." The dark grey tom paused, as if he were trying to find words to speak.

"They attacked us from the trees," Sandfoot said when the younger warrior failed to explain. Gasps rippled through the Clan, and Silverpaw noticed Rookshade tense ever-so-slightly.

"What?" Thistlestar was bounding over now, his eyes wide with shock. "They came from the *trees?"*

"You heard that right." Sandfoot nodded while Newtsplash was ushered to the medicine den. *"That's* why we've been detecting rogue scents inside the territory without trails leading in or out."

Thistlestar fell silent, his fur slowly starting to stick up as he grew angry. "The *audacity,"* he hissed finally, narrowing his eyes as he caught sight of Dawnstrike. "Sandfoot, Falconwing, see Rowanspots and Icepaw for treatment. Dawnstrike, come with me."

Suspicion flashed briefly in his amber eyes, gone so quickly that Silverpaw thought she'd imagined it. The leader waited for Dawnstrike to start following him before he walked towards the Highroot.

Silverpaw watched them go and noticed how her uncle's tail twitched with agitation. After a moment she rose to her paws, intending to follow and listen, when Rookshade leaned over to block her view.

"I know it's tempting," he started, "but you shouldn't be eavesdropping when our Clanmates just got hurt."

Her ears burning with shame, Silverpaw nodded quickly and sat back down. "Y-Yeah, you're right. What about your brother? Shouldn't you check on him?" As she spoke, she suddenly wondered how he knew what she had been planning. *Did he see me eavesdropping on Thistlestar and Mintwillow before?* she thought, worry starting to blossom inside her. Silverpaw eyed her old denmate cautiously, though she saw no signs that gave away his true thoughts.

"Look at him," Rookshade let out a snort of amusement and pointed across the camp with his paw. "He's fine." Silverpaw looked and saw that Falconwing, though visibly injured, was stomping around as if he hardly felt his wounds. Icepaw was trailing after him, desperately trying to usher him into the medicine den for treatment.

"I guess he is," Silverpaw murmured, tilting her head. Then, she realized that Stormpaw had vanished during the commotion—along with Ferrettail. "Rookshade, where is Stormpaw?"

Rookshade didn't meet Silverpaw's stare and instead let his gaze bounce around the clearing until it rested on Cricketpaw and Wasppaw outside of the medicine den. "Pretty sure they went to train not long ago. Cricketpaw wasn't doing the greatest job of watching Ferrettail."

"His mother is hurt!" Silverpaw hissed, feeling a brief surge of anger towards her old denmate. She glanced around and noticed

that Mintwillow stood frozen at the edge of the clearing, a horrified expression on her face. The sight reminded Silverpaw of what her mother had said about her father, and she frowned. Words started falling out of her mouth before she had even processed what was happening. ". . . do you think the rogues had help?"

"What do you mean?" Rookshade asked, a look of genuine surprise appearing on his muzzle. "Help? You mean from within the Clan, right? That's ridiculous."

"I don't know," the silver-point molly continued slowly. "My— I found out that rogues have tried to recruit cats from the Clans before. It's weird that they'd know how to avoid our patrols—and those of other Clans, I'm sure. Before your father brought you here, do you remember hearing anything about that?"

Rookshade looked like he was caught off guard by the question, but he recovered quickly. "Falconwing, Icepaw, and I were pretty young. I remember our mother grew very ill, and some of the other rogues wanted to come to the Clans for help. I never really heard much else about the Clans until Cindertalon brought us here after my mother's death."

Silverpaw immediately realized how insensitive the question was and bowed her head. "Oh, I'm sorry, I wasn't even thinking—"

"Don't be," Rookshade assured her quickly, flicking her shoulder with his tail. "It was a long time ago, so I'm over it, really."

"How dare you?" Before Silverpaw could respond, Dawnstrike's screech rang out as she swiped at a stray twig, sending it and a pawful of needles flying. In front of her, Thistlestar looked taken aback.

"Dawn, I was just trying to ask—"

"You think that because we aren't mates anymore, my loyalty to the Clan is swaying? I can't believe you." Dawnstrike took a step towards Thistlestar and Silverpaw felt her hackles raise instinctively at the warrior's threatening stance.

"W-We aren't—? That's not what I said—!" Hurt shone in the grey-speckled tom's eyes as he tried to find the words to respond to the cream warrior. The sight was enough for Silverpaw to feel a spark of anger at the warrior, but she knew better than to intervene.

"You didn't have to say it." Dawnstrike loosened her stance but kept her head high with a glare fixated on Thistlestar.

Their leader looked wounded by her words as her tail drooped. "Why do you always do this?" His whisper seemed deafening in the silence of the clearing, and he glanced at the cats that had started watching the argument. Dawnstrike finally seemed to notice the attention that was on them and her own tail fell. She whispered something to Thistlestar before whipping around and stalking to her brother, Sandfoot, who was resting just outside the medicine den.

Silverpaw shuffled uncomfortably after the attention on Thistlestar dissipated and caught Rookshade's eye. "They're certainly a dynamic couple," he commented awkwardly.

"She's so mean to him," Silverpaw whispered, feeling bad for her uncle. Every time there was an argument, Dawnstrike seemed to inch closer and closer to her breaking point, the thought of which frightened Silverpaw.

"My father said she's struggled a lot since she found out about her father," Rookshade responded, keeping his voice low. "She acts like she has something to prove to the rest of the Clan." Silverpaw frowned, remembering the night that her own father was confirmed to be a rogue. She didn't feel some sudden need to prove herself, but she did notice Stormpaw start pushing himself harder than before.

"Why would she take it out on Thistlestar, though?" she murmured softly.

Rookshade could only offer a shrug in response. "Maybe she feels weak. Maybe she wanted something more than he gave her."

For a moment, Silverpaw considered asking her uncle, but quickly decided it would be a bad idea. *There are more important*

things to worry about, she reminded herself. She started looking for Cricketpaw, hoping his mother wasn't too injured from the attack. When she saw Rowanspots scolding the fluffy torbie molly, she realized that Newtsplash would be just fine.

Letting her gaze wander to observe the rest of the cats, Silverpaw saw that Mintwillow hadn't moved from before. When she saw the same horrified look in her green eyes, a strange sense of foreboding creeped over her pelt. No matter what she told herself, Silverpaw couldn't banish her suspicions about the rogues, nor could she rid herself of the feelings of dread that bloomed inside her being.

"Silverpaw, are you alright?" Rookshade asked suddenly, his amber eyes searching hers once she met his gaze. *Was it that obvious?*

"Yes, I'm fine," Silverpaw mewed hurriedly when she remembered how close Rookshade and Stormpaw were. The look in Mintwillow's eyes stuck with her even after looking away, and it made her feel strangely afraid. She quickly started worrying, wondering what Mintwillow knew, then remembered something she had said a few nights prior. *He said he wanted her kits—us,* Silverpaw thought, resisting the urge to break her carefree facade.

"You know that I'm not just Stormpaw's friend, right?" Rookshade mumbled after a moment, looking a bit hopeful. His voice interrupted her thoughts, and for a few moments she lost her train of thought. "You can talk to me, too, Silver."

"I know, I'm just tired, really," Silverpaw assured him quickly, adding a subtle laugh to the end of her words for extra measure. "I think I'll sleep early, honestly. I haven't been getting much rest."

"Oh, okay then. Sleep well." As Silverpaw excused herself and retreated to the apprentices' den, she could feel Rookshade's gaze burning into her pelt.

Once she was inside the familiar den, Silverpaw let out a sigh of relief and collapsed into her nest. Without her denmates, an unbearable quiet fell over her, and for what seemed like forever

Silverpaw lay awake in her nest. She found herself missing the soothing sounds of breathing that came from Stormpaw, Cricketpaw, and Wasppaw, and for a moment she regretted her decision to sleep early.

"This is ridiculous," she whispered to herself after ages of silence. "I'm going to keep having those weird dreams—sleeping early won't help me at all." Again, she let out a frustrated sigh and put her paws over her ears in an attempt to muffle the faint ringing tones that existed where there was silence.

After screwing her eyes shut, Silverpaw finally felt sleep creep over her body. She tucked her paws in close to her and let her mind drift off, praying to StarClan for normal dreams—or even a dreamless sleep.

Soon enough, though, she heard the familiar sounds of that strange, dark forest. The sloshing of the murky pools as they lapped at the dry land filled her ears. When she opened her eyes, Silverpaw grimaced at the sight of fungus-covered trees and slimy bark, and the towering, dark foliage. The dream felt slightly different this time, though. Silverpaw could feel the presence of another cat, there was no mistaking it. She felt her fur crawl as if their eyes were on her, and, slowly, she turned around to meet a piercing amber gaze that peered out of the bushes at her.

"Hello, Silverpaw. It's about time we've met." The chilling amber eyes that peered out of the foliage bore painfully into her fur. She shuddered and glanced around quickly before fixing her sight back on the pair of eyes.

"Who are you?" she queried, keeping her voice even despite the fear she felt.

"I'm afraid you're not in a position to be asking questions." The voice was deep and scratchy, as if it hadn't been used in a long, long time. The cat's eyes narrowed after a moment, and then they vanished, though Silverpaw could still feel that same presence.

Suddenly, she felt fur brush against her shoulder as a tom leaned out of the undergrowth beside her. His breath fanned against her

fur as he let out a chuckle before growing serious again. Silverpaw fought the urge to scramble away as she turned to face him and saw that his fur was a bluish-grey, and he had white splotches dotting his pelt.

"I've come to you with a deal you couldn't possibly turn down," he purred slowly, watching Silverpaw like a hawk about to swoop down on its prey.

"And what would that be?" Silverpaw mewed in response. She started to back away slowly while keeping her eyes glued to his form. There was a flicker of amusement in his eyes, though he stayed rooted to his own spot.

"I'd just like to offer you some . . . alternative training." As he spoke, the grey tom's eyes rolled a bit as if he were thinking of the right words. "It's nothing bad, I promise, I just . . . well . . . ." He trailed off and slowly started padding toward Silverpaw, sounding a bit conflicted.

"Well what?" she asked, feeling pity for the tom beneath the fear he sparked in her. *Is he all alone here?* she wondered sympathetically. *I guess it makes sense, in a sad sort of way.*

At her invitation, the tom took another step forward. "I couldn't help but notice the turmoil that's been growing inside your heart." He lifted his paw and reached it forward with a single claw extended, pointing at Silverpaw's chest.

"The turmoil?" Silverpaw echoed, flicking her ears uneasily.

"Yes, haven't you felt it? It's what led you to this place." The cat backed away and waved his tail in a gesture towards the surrounding forest. "It's what led you to *me*. What do you say, Silverpaw? A little extra training couldn't hurt, could it, now?"

Silverpaw considered it for a minute, keeping her eyes locked onto the white-spotted tom. "I don't know . . . ." she murmured at last. As much as she wanted to trust him, she'd felt a strange feeling of foreboding since she first woke up in this place—this unnamed, creepy forest.

"Come on, Silverpaw, how bad could it be?" When the tom took a few steps forward, Silverpaw stepped backwards. She blinked, and his image faded away just to materialize once again behind her.

"H-How did you do that?" Silverpaw snapped quickly as she spun around, fear coursing through her body. There was a strange glint in his eyes now, a kind of dangerous emotion that wasn't there a moment ago.

"What, this old trick?" With a smirk, he did it again, this time vanishing and materializing right in front of Silverpaw's face. "I can show you lots of neat things just like that if you'd just stick with me."

Silverpaw swallowed thickly and glanced around nervously. Suddenly, it felt as if all of the trees had eyes, and she feared that the dark, looming plants would turn into claws to grab hold of her and keep her here. The tom in front of her waited patiently for her answer, a smirk still on his muzzle and the strange emotion remaining in his amber eyes. His tail tip twitched lazily behind him, drawing imaginary, jagged shapes in the dense air.

"Silverpaw, you know I can't wait for you forever," he coaxed her when she didn't respond. He raised his paw to take a step forward, and then he hesitated, as if he'd heard something. When he decided it was nothing, he started stalking towards Silverpaw again, his teeth glinting in the starless forest.

"That's quite enough, Snowface." Suddenly, a starry-furred cat was weaving through the trees, their gaze fixated on the tom. Silverpaw squinted at them, realizing she could barely make out their features, though she thought she saw a faint hint of dark stripes. "Leave this young cat alone."

"Of course it's you, *again,*" Snowface muttered so quietly that Silverpaw could barely hear it. Then, he stood upright and turned to the starry cat, a mockingly delightful expression on his face. "Oh? And to whom do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

The new cat ignored his question, making their way closer to Silverpaw. "How come you're the one doing the dirty work,

Snowface?" they asked with a glance down at the silver apprentice. "I thought you liked to keep your paws clean these days."

Snowface narrowed his eyes at that, his eyes locked to the newcomer's every movement. "Oh, you know, Frostheart has been skipping out on his duties. Naturally, I had to clean up after my little brother. Besides, it isn't like I can just *go up to him* and remind him he has work to do." He rolled his eyes a bit with a gesture to the dark forest before turning his stare back on Silverpaw.

The stranger stared at Snowface for a few moments, their tail twitching with visible apprehension. Silverpaw slowly started to duck behind them—she didn't understand what was going on at all, but if some shiny, starry cat showed up to save her from a creepy forest, she was going to trust them.

"Don't tell me you've grown scared of this place, too?" Snowface spat out suddenly, his voice trembling with laughter. He stared at the cat's tail before taking a few menacing steps forward. When the starry cat didn't budge, he stopped and frowned, suddenly looking a bit uneasy. "It's not this place that you're scared of, is it?" There was something else in his eyes now, something Silverpaw could only identify as fear.

"Silverpaw, come with me," the starry cat mewed after a moment of silence. "It isn't safe for you to be here."

Without waiting for a sign of her compliance, the cat turned away from Silverpaw and started padding back the way they had come. They walked with confidence, as if they knew she would follow—and she did. Silverpaw hesitantly started following in their path, noticing how their paws left a faint shimmer with each step. After a few paces, she glanced back at Snowface only to see that he had vanished again.

Silverpaw caught up to the stranger quickly, watching in awe as the dark, murky forest slowly turned into a warm forest that shimmered with starry sunlight. She looked around, feeling her uneasiness ebb away the further they trekked.

"What is all this about?" she asked after a while, looking

curiously at the cat that she'd decided was a member of StarClan.

"That's something you don't need to worry about," they responded coolly, their eyes darting around nervously.

"You're a StarClan cat, aren't you?" Silverpaw continued, eyeing them carefully. "Who are you? And what was *that* place?"

The cat let out a sigh and turned to her, their tail tip twitching. "That was the Place of No Stars."

Ignoring their visible cues for her to stop talking, Silverpaw tilted her head a bit. "The Place of No Stars?"

"Yes." They turned away from her again, their eyes scanning the trees cautiously. "Cats who have done terrible deeds, especially those without remorse are denied residence in StarClan. That's where they go instead. They are not to be trusted, Silverpaw."

Silverpaw glanced over her shoulder worriedly. "StarClan can reject cats . . . ?"

"Not StarClan." They spoke abruptly, clearly unwilling to elaborate what they meant. Silverpaw grew uneasy as she looked up at the sky and followed the cat further into the forest.

"Okay . . . ." she murmured slowly, deciding to steer the conversation in a different direction. "So, evil cats go there, and then what? I've heard legends of a place like that, but when we asked the medicine cat she just avoided the question—"

"That's because they've been taught not to confirm it," the cat snapped over their shoulder. "And you won't be speaking of it, either." Eventually, they reached an empty clearing and stopped.

"Wait, what? Why?" Silverpaw held back a frown as she sat down near the cat.

They turned to her and mimicked her movement, and when they spoke, they ignored her question. "Once a cat is sent to the Place of No Stars, they're sentenced to wander alone for the rest of their spirit's existence. *Clearly* they've found loopholes, though we aren't

sure how. The more aware the living Clans are, the more at risk they are."

"You mean . . . by talking to me, that's the loophole? Summoning me to that forest in my dreams?" Silverpaw nodded slowly as she started to grasp the concept of a StarClan for villainous cats.

"You're not the only one." As they spoke, Silverpaw glanced around, and when she looked back the cat had vanished without a trace.

She jumped to her paws and glanced around wildly, searching for a hint of where they had gone. Then she remembered how Snowface had vanished into thin air, and realized that they must be able to do the same thing. The next thing Silverpaw knew, she was jumping awake in her nest, the chill of the late night air seeping into her pelt. Beside her, Stormpaw's nest was empty, his scent faded, and she grew worried. She looked around the den, picking out each of her denmates.

"Cricketpaw . . . and Wasppaw . . . but Stormpaw's scent is too faint for him to have gotten up for a drink." Silverpaw whispered to herself, wondering where he could have gone. Suddenly, the den felt far too suffocating, and she stumbled into the clearing for a breath of fresh air.

Once outside, she looked up and saw that the moon was still high in the sky. *I guess sleeping early really was a bad idea,* she thought with a sigh, deciding to blame her untimely wake on that rather than her unsettling dreams. After a short while, the entrance to the camp quivered slightly and Silverpaw started. She spun around, finding the shadow of a tall, winding root and deciding to hide in the darkness while whoever—or *what*ever—it was showed itself.

Right after Silverpaw hid herself, Stormpaw came slinking into the camp. He glanced around the clearing warily before sneaking into their den, and once Silverpaw decided that nobody else was following after him, she crept after him. *Why would he be out at this time?* she wondered to herself, tempted to ask him about it. Once she saw that he had already fallen asleep, his breathing slow and

steady, she decided on a better plan—she'd wait for him to sneak out of camp again, and follow him.

Chapter Ten

Stormpaw panted as he practiced the new moves that Dawnstrike and Ferrettail had shown him. The moon was climbing in the sky, its light illuminating their figures and highlighting the Dawnstrike's muscles underneath her pelt; the sight of it left Stormpaw feeling envious, and he wished he could become as strong as her. Ferrettail watched them as he sat at the trunk of a tree, his body completely still.

After a while, Stormpaw paused for a break and fixed his gaze on the canopy of leaves left a dapple-patterned shadow on the forest floor. "Did the rogues *really* attack from the trees?" he asked slowly as he dropped his gaze to the two warriors.

Guilt briefly flashed in Dawnstrike's green eyes as she sent a glance toward Ferrettail. "Yes, they did," she mewed softly.

"How did they even think of that?" Stormpaw questioned further, looking upwards again as he thought of cats launching themselves out of the trees in an attack. "It's pretty creative."

"Eh . . . ." Ferrettail looked a bit awkward as he answered the question, shuffling his paws in the grass beneath him. "Dawnstrike and I mentioned it as a joke. We didn't think they'd actually take the advice, much less actually *learn* how to travel through the treetops."

Stormpaw started at his words, his jaw gaping at the revelation. "But this is our Clan!" he gasped, appalled at the idea of helping the rogues. "Dawnstrike, your brother got hurt because of that!"

"Look, they're just trying to scare the Clans a bit, Stormpaw," Dawnstrike retorted, lashing her tail. "They want to be treated better than they are, and if that means a few cats get hurt along the way, then so be it."

"Aren't they already treated just fine?" Stormpaw frowned and

stared at the cream-furred molly. "I know RushClan can be rude, but that's because Wolfstar is practically ancient. Almost every other Clan has welcomed rogue cats into their ranks—MistClan was *rebuilt* with rogues!"

Dawnstrike let out an exasperated sigh and shook her head. "You wouldn't understand."

Her words ignited an anger deep within Stormpaw, and he growled before taking a few paces forward. "My father was a rogue, too, you know! I understand exactly what you went through and maybe more!" He kept his glare fixated on Dawnstrike, while her own eyes widened in surprise at his words.

"Okay, okay, keep it down!" Ferrettail hissed and jumped forward, pushing his way between the two cats. "Do you want to wake the entire forest, Stormpaw? And Dawn, don't act so shocked—everyone practically knew already."

Dawnstrike deflated a bit at his words and let out an irritable huff. "If I'm being honest, I figured that Mintwillow was just really embarrassed about a half-Clan relationship. She didn't seem the type to associate with rogues." Stormpaw shuffled his paws a bit, growing painfully uncomfortable by where the conversation was heading, even if he had been the one to steer it there.

"Ugh, whatever," he grumbled quickly, turning away from the warriors. "Let's just train some more before it's too late. Are there any other moves you guys know?"

"Alright," Ferrettail mewed, sounding amused at Stormpaw's prickly tone. "Why don't you try climbing a small tree? It *is* a pretty trusty tactic, and it could help us in battle if the Clans ever go to war again."

"When they go to war," Dawnstrike chimed in quickly, rolling her eyes. "With the way Wolfstar has been acting, I wouldn't be surprised if BlazeClan and MistClan ceased any friendly interactions with them. Won't be long for us, either." Stormpaw winced as she said that, remembering how Thistlestar had lashed out at Wolfstar at the Gathering. *At least now I know why he got so defensive,* he

thought bitterly.

"Meh, you say pheasant, I say pheasant." Ferrettail flicked his tail indifferently before turning towards a smallish tree and stalking up to it. "Stormpaw, observe."

Swiftly, the brown-and-white tom climbed up the trunk until he got to the lowest branch, which was still a considerable ways up. Stormpaw craned his neck upwards to see the tom wave his thick-furred tail towards a smaller tree, and then nod back to the grey apprentice.

"Your turn," he chirped, looking amused when Stormpaw hesitated.

Stormpaw glanced up at the moon, noting how it neared the peak of its own nightly patrol in the sky. Then, he took a deep breath and started to climb the tree. Briefly he imagined that it felt like the trees in his dreams—the dark trees covered in slimy bark and disturbing fungal growths—and he nearly lost his grip and fell. Once he steadied himself, he kept trying to climb further until he reached the lowest of the branches and clung to it.

"Is this necessary?" he panted, ignoring how dizzy he got when he looked at the ground. "I thought we were going to train for something better. You know, like a *battle*."

"This *is* battle training, Stormpaw," Dawnstrike muttered dryly as she padded to the tree trunk and peered up to him. While she spoke, Ferrettail dropped down from his perch and joined her. "They attacked our patrol only yesterday, clearly it works."

Stormpaw slowly got comfortable on the branch. "How will this help me, though?" he asked with a frown. At the end of the day, the most important thing to him was protecting Silverpaw from further wounding—physical or emotional.

"This will make you stronger, just like the rest of our training. Isn't that why you agreed to this?" As she spoke, Dawnstrike tilted her head curiously and Stormpaw looked away from her.

"Well, yeah, of course," he grumbled before leaping down from the tree limb. "Is that all, or are there more moves to show me?"

"Calm down there, kit," Ferrettail chuckled and motioned for Dawnstrike to observe as they trained. "You could always practice the moves you already know."

"Yeah, I guess so," Stormpaw snorted a bit as he spoke and fell into a mock fighting stance. "I've got the rest of my life to practice those, though. Show me something new!"

"I already did," Ferrettail smirked a bit and mimicked the apprentice's motions, then added, "Ah, why not? You're the one asking for a challenge."

He lunged at Stormpaw with his claws safely sheathed and his teeth hardly bared. Stormpaw let out a laugh and went to counter his attack only to gasp in surprise when the warrior feigned an attack and ducked behind him. When he spun around to pin Ferrettail against the tree he had run toward, Stormpaw realized too late that the warrior had leaped against the tree trunk to *spring off of it,* twisting in the air to face the apprentice when he landed. The move left the grey tom cornered against the tree and completely awestruck.

"That was awesome!" Stormpaw exclaimed, excitement burning at his pelt. "You *have* to show me how to do that!"

Ferrettail let out a laugh and glanced at Dawnstrike. "Hey, Dawn, what if we introduce him to the rogues?"

"What is wrong with you?" Dawnstrike hissed, though her tone sounded unusually playful, and the older warrior laughed at her response.

"Hey, come on, hear me out!" he stuttered through his fading laughter. "He's got the drive and the sheer determination, they'd love to meet a cat like him! Besides, they need to know who's on their side."

Dawnstrike quickly opened her mouth to argue. The second she

did, Ferrettail kept speaking, and the two warriors erupted into hushed bickering over the idea. Stormpaw watched them for a few moments, not sure if he should be amused or embarrassed for them and their antics, and once he decided on the latter he spoke up.

"I actually wouldn't mind meeting them," he offered quietly, his voice catching their attention. "I bet *they* could teach me some really unique battle moves! I could probably impress the entire Clan like that!"

Both warriors laughed at his curiosity, and Dawnstrike suddenly exchanged warm glance with Ferrettail. "He's got spirit, I'll give him that," she purred. "I guess we could consider the idea, but we have to be sure it's worth it." Just like that, her warm gaze had hardened and she gave Ferrettail a serious look.

Stormpaw tilted his head a bit as he inspected the warrior he'd grown closer to during his apprenticeship. While he quickly learned to understand her off-putting attitudes, he couldn't quite figure out why Dawnstrike would take it out on Thistlestar. During their training sessions, she acted so much more kindly to Ferrettail and to himself, and he wondered what his uncle could have possibly done to invoke her wrath. Before he could ask, he heard a twig snap, and all three NightClan cats whipped around to see who had approached them.

In the darkness, Stormpaw could barely make out a familiar patch of fluffy, pale silver fur, and he felt his heart drop as he called out his sister's name. "Silverpaw?"

Immediately, Silverpaw crawled out of her hiding spot, her blue eyes troubled and her stance wary. "You want to meet the rogues?" she questioned softly, her voice wavering a bit. "The rogues that attacked our Clanmates . . . ?"

Beside Stormpaw, Ferrettail cleared his throat meaningfully. He glanced toward him and Dawnstrike and saw that they were bristling defensively, their wide eyes fixated on Silverpaw almost threateningly. *Silverpaw, why did you have to come here?* Stormpaw thought helplessly. He saw Ferrettail prepare to step forward and instinctively moved himself toward Silverpaw. When he did so,

Silverpaw took a few steps backward and his breath caught painfully in his throat.

"It's harmless, Silverpaw, I promise," Stormpaw murmured hesitantly, desperate to convince her. "It's just some training, okay? At the end of the day, it'll make us all better warriors for NightClan—for uncle Thistlestar! You don't have to join us, or even understand it, but—" he broke off with a wary glance at the warriors who trained him while Wrenfeather was busy "—*please* don't make a big deal out of it."

For a few moments, Silverpaw was visibly conflicted. For the first time since they were apprenticed, there was no sign of the friendly facade of hers that Stormpaw grew to resent—or rather, he hated what drove her to adopt such a mask. The turmoil in her eyes made Stormpaw's heart twist in his chest, and he almost found himself wishing she had kept her carefree illusions up. Then, the silver-point tabby ducked her head so low that he couldn't see her expression. When Silverpaw lifted her muzzle to face them all again, her expression was brighter, though Stormpaw noticed the guarded look in her eyes.

"Okay, don't worry, Stormpaw!" she mewed quickly, her voice chirping with friendliness. "I trust you. But uh . . . don't train with your claws, okay? Your long fur can only hide so many scratches before someone else sees and gets suspicious."

Stormpaw resisted the urge to reel from her words. *She saw the wound on my shoulder?* he thought incredulously, almost wanting to twist his head to check the healing injury. The molly in his dreams had given it to him when they started to train using their claws after only a few sessions, and despite her promises that it was only a method used for his training sessions with her, the claw-mark had followed him into the waking life.

"We absolutely do not train with our claws," Ferrettail spoke up quickly, his tone unusually strained. "He must have caught himself on a rose bush."

Stormpaw burned under the stare Silverpaw gave him after hearing that, unable to pinpoint her emotions. She ducked her head

again, keeping her eyes on her brother this time as she said, "Understandable. Enjoy your night, and be careful."

Without another word, the apprentice turned and headed back to the camp. Stormpaw watched his sister vanish into the darkness, resisting the urge to run after her and tell her that what they were doing was *good*. It was going to help him protect her. He glanced toward Dawnstrike and Ferrettail and saw that both of them were staring at him, the former looking worried and the latter more suspicious. *Does Dawnstrike know about the StarClan visits, too?* he wondered before suddenly remembering what he was going to ask her.

Ferrettail took a few pawsteps forward before Stormpaw could speak, his eyes boring into the apprentice's pelt. "Should we be worried about her?" he asked, his tone frighteningly serious.

"Worried about what, Silverpaw telling someone?" Stormpaw bristled defensively, ignoring the foreboding feeling he got when he met the warrior's gaze. "No, she wouldn't do that. Don't worry."

For a moment, Ferrettail only stared at Stormpaw suspiciously. Then he grunted and waved his tail to beckon the younger cats after him before he padded into the forest—back toward their camp. Stormpaw trailed a bit behind them, gazing up at the moon as it crept toward the horizon once again. *How far would they go to keep Silverpaw quiet?* he asked himself, suppressing a shudder at the thought. *I know she wouldn't tell. She trusts me, she'll understand!*

Once they neared the camp, Ferrettail glanced over his shoulder, his eyes glinting through the darkness. "Remember the secret entryway. I'll go first; the two of you should wait a bit before following me, and each other." With that, the brown-and-white tom vanished into a small hole in the sturdy walls of the camp, leaving Stormpaw and Dawnstrike to sit in each other's company.

"Have you been sleeping alright, Stormpaw?" Dawnstrike asked suddenly, though her tone was surprisingly gentle. When Stormpaw looked at her, he saw that she wasn't facing him at all. Instead, she sat with her back angled toward him and her face slightly raised to observe the fading sparkles of Silverpelt in the sky.

"Uhm, I guess so," Stormpaw responded slowly, getting comfortable and gazing at the stars as well. "I've been a bit tired lately, but it's nothing I can't handle."

Dawnstrike chuckled softly, though for a few moments she didn't respond. As Stormpaw gazed at the night sky, he thought of how the strange StarClan cat frequently urged him to find the rogues, and his own father. She seemed so certain that the unnamed tom was still out there, and quickly grew obsessed with the idea of Stormpaw meeting him—even more obsessed than Stormpaw himself felt.

Then he grew annoyed with the mere thought of her as he remembered how she claimed that Thistlestar's threat to tell the siblings was empty. *If his threats were so empty, Mintwillow wouldn't have listened to him!* he thought. *Thistlestar has been one of the only cats to truly look out for us.*

"You should rest more," Dawnstrike murmured, startling Stormpaw. "There's nothing wrong with taking a few nights for yourself. You've only just become an apprentice, and you've got plenty of time left to get stronger."

Stormpaw frowned and considered her words for a moment. "Hey, Dawnstrike, could I ask you a question?"

"Sure, what is it?" Though her response was smooth, Stormpaw didn't miss how she tensed in apprehension. He took a deep breath, ready for the cream warrior to grow angry with what he was about to ask.

"What's going on with you and uncle Thistlestar?" the apprentice tried to keep his voice low as he continued. "You're . . . well, you're really mean to him, and I've never seen him do or say anything to provoke you. What did he ever do to you?"

Dawnstrike fell silent for a few moments, and Stormpaw could see her tail tip twitching at her paws as she thought of a response. "Um . . . I'm . . . I'm not proud of the way I've acted, Stormpaw. You're right that he's never really provoked me—if I'm being honest, your uncle is the kindest, most caring cat I've ever met. It's— it's

difficult to explain, and you should probably head inside."

"Try to explain it first," Stormpaw pleaded, trying not to grow upset with her. "I don't know much about your relationship with him, but it's obvious he cares about you. What happened for you to push him away like you do?"

"You wouldn't understand," she muttered, her voice becoming harsher. "You're still an apprentice, I wouldn't expect you to know anything that we've gone through. You probably even haven't had your first crush yet."

Stormpaw narrowed his eyes and stomped around Dawnstrike's body to look her in the eye. "I might not know anything about the kind of love you and Thistlestar have, but I know about a different kind of love. My sister is my best friend, and when I see her hurting, I want to do *everything* in my power to help her and protect her. Nothing, and I repeat *nothing* could make me want to hurt her the way you've hurt my uncle."

"And I bet you'd go as far as training with some creepy cat in your dreams to achieve the strength to protect her." Her sudden accusation drove a sensation of shock through Stormpaw, and when his expression confirmed her suspicions, Dawnstrike continued with furious eyes. "A cat that you believe is a StarClan cat *just because they said so?* What happens if you find out Silverpaw is being visited by a cat just like that?"

"What happens in my dreams isn't your business," Stormpaw snapped angrily, quickly realizing she was trying to dodge his questions. "What did Thistlestar do to make you act like you do?" Dawnstrike rose to her paws so that she stood slightly taller than Stormpaw, lashing her tail as she prepared a response.

"I want a *family,* Stormpaw." When she spoke, her voice was a distraught whisper, and she dug her claws into the earth below her. "I have Sandfoot, but we're not close, and Vinecrawl is a story of her own. I want kits of my own, but you know what he said to me?"

Stormpaw frowned a bit and stepped away, eyeing her carefully. "What did he say?" he asked slowly, starting to regret pushing the

warrior to explain herself.

"Thistlestar said that along with the *duties* of being a leader, he was already caught up raising kits!" Dawnstrike lashed her tail again and glared at the now-shocked apprentice. "You think your mother suddenly got distant when you were apprenticed? She's *always* been that way, and Thistlestar always had to step in to look after you and provide for you."

"What are you talking about?" Stormpaw snapped incredulously, starting to feel cornered by her words. "Sure, Thistlestar was present, but my mother was just as active in raising us."

"That's a load of fox-dung," Dawnstrike hissed. *"Honestly,* you can't be this blind. I don't hold it against you—you and your sister are merely victims of the circumstances, and I like to think we understand each other more than others. But along with ruining *your* sense of love, Mintwillow *destroyed* my relationship with Thistlestar, and I will never forgive her for it."

"Well, we aren't kits anymore," Stormpaw muttered, wondering if there was truth to Dawnstrike's words. "Why can't you ask him again? Uncle Thistlestar is understanding."

"The damage is done, Stormpaw," she grumbled, turning away from him again. "I'm sorry I snapped at you. Like I said, it's a situation that's difficult for me to explain. You should head on inside."

Stormpaw stared at Dawnstrike for a moment before squeezing into the hole in the camp wall. He silently weaved through the smaller, hidden tunnel before he came out in the middle of the main entrance. With a final glance over his shoulder, Stormpaw headed to the apprentices' den and settled down next to Silverpaw's sleeping form.

Chapter Eleven

Stormpaw stretched near the main entrance to the camp, glancing up at the chilled sun momentarily. *Soon enough, leafbare will be here,* he thought, wondering what the forest would look like covered in snow. He almost felt bad for the RushClan cats—he probably *would* feel sorry for them if they didn't have such a rude old cat for a leader. Their river would be freezing soon, and every cat knew that the fish lurking in the water were their main source of food.

He let his gaze travel across the camp, watching as his Clanmates interacted. Newtsplash sat with Wrenfeather, the two cats sharing tongues as they relaxed for the remainder of the day. His mentor's sister, Dovesong could be heard scolding Ferrettail just outside the medicine den for not visiting the sick Warblerwing. Stormpaw held back a frown as he briefly looked for Mintwillow around the camp, wondering if, after all she'd done to them, he would still visit his mother should she fall sick.

When he couldn't find the dark silver warrior, he noticed the lighter silver pelt of his sister. Silverpaw had avoided him since she caught him training with Dawnstrike and Ferrettail, though she clearly had no intentions of telling anyone about it or his plans to meet the rogues. Beside her sat both Cricketpaw and Rookshade, the former looking rather annoyed with the latter's presence. *Maybe the annoyance will push him away,* he thought a bit too proudly.

After a short while, Stormpaw rose to his paws and trotted over to the trio. He locked eyes with Rookshade, giving his friend an approving nod as Cricketpaw carried their conversation.

"Hey, Silverpaw, I found this cool spot while I was on a hunting patrol the other day!" the brown tabby mewed excitedly. "I really wanna show you sometime, if you wanna see it."

"Oh, where at?" Silverpaw purred, twitching her whiskers curiously. "What about our mentors?"

"It's a bit north of the camp, I'm sure my dad would let us go!" Cricketpaw chirped happily in response.

Stormpaw resisted the urge to roll his eyes, and he could see that Rookshade felt the same by the way he twitched his tail tip suddenly. *Wrenfeather being his father shouldn't get him privileges like that,* he thought as he eyed his denmate. *Everyone knows apprentices can't just go out without a warrior with them, unless they're sent by their mentor or some other cat.* Then Stormpaw's gaze fell on Rookshade again and he got an idea—he'd have to put it on standby for now, though. He had come here for something else.

The grey tom cleared his throat and feigned an apologetic expression as he interrupted the conversation between Cricketpaw and Silverpaw. "Hey, Silverpaw, could we talk for a moment?"

"Sure," Silverpaw mewed after eyeing him cautiously. Wordlessly, Stormpaw rose to his paws and beckoned for his sister to follow him away from the other cats.

"I'll be here once you're done, Silv!" Cricketpaw called cheerily.

"So will I," Rookshade added, his tone calmer than the younger tom's as he glanced toward Stormpaw. The grey apprentice gave his friend another encouraging nod as he led Silverpaw to a secluded spot in the clearing, finding refuge beneath a high overhanging root that most cats seemed to choose for more private conversations.

Once they had settled, Stormpaw gave his sister a serious look. "You know I wouldn't do anything to endanger you, right?"

"Are you talking about the night I found you with Dawnstrike and Ferrettail?" Silverpaw asked, tilting her head with the question. "Look, I trust you, but it isn't *me* that I'm worried about."

Stormpaw frowned and shifted in his spot. "What do you mean?" he mewed slowly.

"Stormpaw, the rogues are a danger." This time, Silverpaw's tone had a scolding edge to it. "You heard that BlazeClan cat at the Gathering—an ex-rogue, no less. For the love of StarClan, they

attacked a patrol of ours!"

"No, it's—" Stormpaw started defensively before breaking off with a frustrated sigh. "Dawnstrike said that they're just trying to scare us. None of the wounds were serious, they're clearly just trying to make a point. They want us to treat them better!"

"The rogues are treated just *fine,"* Silverpaw retorted quickly, sounding annoyed. "The only cats that are rude to them are old fleabags like Wolfstar or that SwiftClan cat at the Gathering. Do you forget about Cindertalon and his kits? Or Newtsplash and Rowanspots? If they wanted to make a point, why would they target one of the most rogue-friendly Clans? Surely they'd target RushClan."

Stormpaw frowned and tried to think of a rebuttal, but he couldn't. He knew his sister was right. "Okay, but why would they attack us, then?" *NightClan territory* is *one of the furthest from the Twolegplace,* he thought, growing conflicted when he couldn't think of an excuse for it.

"I don't know," Silverpaw mumbled as she looked away and shrugged. "Just be careful, okay? I trust you when you say you're trying to better yourself—you know I trust you. I believe some extra training *would* be good for the Clan, but this talk of rogues frightens me. Don't forget what Mintwillow said about our father."

"Why should we trust her?" he grumbled in response, hardly thinking about how Silverpaw rarely referred to the molly as *'mother'* anymore. "She hasn't even *spoken* to us since that night! She's the reason Dawnstrike's relationship with uncle Thistlestar is in shambles!"

"Wait, what?" Silverpaw's head jerked in surprise at her brother's words. "What are you even talking about? How could she be responsible for that?"

Immediately, Stormpaw knew that he had said too much—that was Dawnstrike's personal business, and he knew he'd have to explain. With a hesitant sigh, he said, "That night you found us training, Dawnstrike told me that uncle Thistlestar was too busy

helping Mintwillow raise us to have a family with her. It's a big part of why she's so angry all the time."

Silverpaw fixed him with a disbelieving look and snorted. "There's still time for them to have kits, bee-brain. It's not like they're old enough to retire!"

"I guess that's true, but Dawnstrike said that the damage has already been done." Stormpaw could only offer a weak shrug, still feeling painfully conflicted about what the cream molly had said.

"Well, that's her own fault, then," Silverpaw huffed, sticking her nose up angrily. "She can't just take it out on Thistlestar and blame her actions on someone else, even if Mintwillow *did* cause what Dawnstrike says she did."

"I don't know, Silverpaw," Stormpaw murmured reluctantly. "I know it doesn't seem right to us, but I really feel like I should trust Dawnstrike on this one."

"That's fine, then," Silverpaw relaxed with another shrug, this time fixing her brother with a warm and almost apologetic gaze. "Let's not fight over some other cat's relationship, though. I really hate how she treats him, but it's not really our place to meddle . . . ." She trailed off at the end, her gaze traveling slowly to Thistlestar's den.

Despite her words, Stormpaw knew better than anyone that she *really* wanted to talk to their uncle and convince him that he's worth more than how Dawnstrike treated him. The dark apprentice agreed wholeheartedly—even if what Dawnstrike said was true, the circumstances weren't Thistlestar's fault, either. Instead of speaking on the reality they both silently acknowledged, Stormpaw decided to agree with his sister's words.

"Yeah, okay," he nodded with a chuckle that sounded more relieved than he had intended. "You can get back to Cricketpaw and Rookshade now, if you want."

It was Silverpaw's turn to look unsure and conflicted, and she glanced down at her paws before speaking. "Actually, Stormpaw,

there's something I should tell you, as well. I should have mentioned it a while ago, actually."

"What is it?" Stormpaw asked slowly, feeling uneasy with the hesitance in her voice. *It couldn't be worse than me wanting to meet the rogues,* he told himself, even though he'd never heard his sister sound like that.

Silverpaw shuffled her paws before responding, which only worsened Stormpaw's worry. "I was told not to say anything, but I can't keep quiet any longer. Not long ago I started having these weird dreams in this . . . really creepy forest. There was this dark sludge in the rivers and puddles, and dark, slimy trees, and– and the *plants—"*

"—were dark and ominous and towering?" Stormpaw interrupted as he jumped to his paws excitedly. This was way better than what he could have imagined hearing.

" . . . yeah, they were," Silverpaw murmured slowly, eyeing her brother carefully. "You've had similar dreams, then?"

"Yeah, and this cat visited me!" Stormpaw blurted happily, ignoring his sister's wary stance. "I don't know her name, but she said she's a StarClan cat, and that she can help me get stronger with some special training!"

"Is that how you got that wound?" Silverpaw spoke again after a moment of thought. With her tail, she motioned toward the healing scratch on his shoulder, carefully concealed by his long fur.

"It is, actually." Suddenly, he felt a bit uncomfortable, but he tried to move through the question seamlessly. "It's okay, though. Are you training with them, too?"

"No." Silverpaw's initial response was blunt and colder than Stormpaw had ever heard, and she quickly tried to smooth it over. "A tom named Snowface tried to talk to me and recruit me, but a . . . *another* StarClan cat showed up. They wouldn't tell me their identity, but took me away from that forest and into real StarClan territory."

"What?" Stormpaw's excitement faltered at his sister's words. *"Real* StarClan territory?"

Silverpaw ignored him and continued explaining what had happened. "Something was wrong, I think. They were scared of something—both of them. The StarClan cat said that the creepy forest is called The Place of No Stars, and that we shouldn't trust the cats we meet there. That place is where evil cats are sent, instead of StarClan."

Stormpaw stared at Silverpaw for a moment, trying to formulate a response. "Well, I'm sure it's technically still StarClan, right? I mean, it's still part of our afterlife."

"I guess so," Silverpaw looked away, her flicking ears the only sign of her uneasiness. "I think it would be more accurate to call it the territory of Silverpelt. Did the cat that's training you even tell you her name?"

"Well, no, as a matter of fact, she didn't," Stormpaw's tone grew flat for a moment before he offered an easy-going shrug. "That's alright, though. I don't need to know her name. Besides, Silv, she's just like us—she never knew her father! She told me that if we think ours is out there, then we should try to find him."

"What?" Silverpaw stared at him again, though she'd already rebuilt her walls well enough that Stormpaw couldn't pinpoint her thoughts. "Are you out of your mind? He could have been the one that staged the attack in the first place. Besides, what are you gonna do if you find him? Hug him to death and thank him for being such a *great* and *present* father?"

Stormpaw rolled his eyes at her sudden sarcasm. "I don't think he staged the attack. C'mon, Silverpaw, what harm could come from it?"

Silverpaw only let out a sigh and held Stormpaw's encouraging gaze for a few moments. Then, she snuck a glance away from him, suspicion flashing in her blue eyes. Stormpaw snapped his head to follow her gaze and saw that Mintwillow had finally appeared in the clearing, though the molly stood alone. Her stance was rigid as

her gaze traveled across the camp, wariness present in her green eyes.

"Alright, okay," Silverpaw finally gave in and nodded to him. "I trust you. I'm going to go back with Cricketpaw since we both have the evening free, okay? Take it easy on the extra training, please."

"And Rookshade!" Stormpaw added, nudging her playfully before she padded away. Silverpaw merely rolled her eyes lightheartedly as she trotted back to her Clanmates. As he watched her go, Stormpaw wondered why an unidentified StarClan cat would stop Silverpaw from training. *No matter,* he told himself after a moment. *I need to take every chance I can to get stronger. For Silverpaw.*

From across the clearing, Stormpaw sent Rookshade a friendly glance and rose to his paws. He glanced at the medicine den and saw that while Dovesong had vanished, Ferrettail hovered just outside the den, looking unsure of himself. Then, he remembered how Warblerwing had been one of the elders to defend rogue-born cats when he was still a kit.

Deciding that *someone* should visit the sick elder, Stormpaw strolled past Ferrettail and into the medicine den. Almost as soon as he pushed past the curtain of lichen, Warblerwing stirred in his makeshift nest, his attention on the grey-furred apprentice.

"Hey there, Stormpaw," the golden tabby tom croaked as if he had just woken from a deep slumber. "I've hardly seen you since you became an apprentice! Did you get hurt or something?" The old tom tilted his head, the curly tufts of fur on his cheeks bouncing from the motion.

"I actually came to visit you, Warblerwing," Stormpaw admitted with a glance around the den. "I guess I've been a bit caught up with my training, though. How are you feeling?"

"Oh, I can't complain," Warblerwing responded, stifling a cough. "Rowanspots takes good care of me, and Icepaw, too. I think I'll be all recovered soon 'nuff."

Stormpaw eyed the elder skeptically, noting how each breath of his produced a rattling, wheezing noise. He wasn't a medicine cat by any means, but the noise worried him enough to doubt his words. Briefly, he wondered why in the world Ferrettail wouldn't visit his sick father before remembering what the brown-and-white tom once said.

'Besides, I understand more than you might realize, Stormpaw.'

As he watched Warblerwing's movements, Stormpaw wondered what could have happened between Ferrettail and his father—or his late mother—to cause such a rift between them. Warblerwing was always nice to him and the other apprentices. He'd never heard of the family getting into squabbles, either—certainly not like how Dawnstrike would lash out at Thistlestar, nor like what was happening himself, Silverpaw, and their mother.

"Stormpaw, you doin' okay, kit?" The phrase shocked Stormpaw, and suddenly he realized that Ferrettail truly took after his father. Warblerwing was looking concerned with the apprentice, and he realized that he had completely zoned out.

"Y-Yeah, sorry, Warblerwing," Stormpaw stuttered, growing embarrassed. "I've got a lot on my mind lately. But, uh, why . . . why doesn't Ferrettail visit you much? If it's okay for me to ask, of course."

Warblerwing's expression fell a bit when Stormpaw spoke, but he quickly recovered from it to answer him. "Oh, I'm not too sure. I'm sure there are plenty of reasons—Brightleap and I weren't the best parents in the Clans, you know."

Certainly better than mine, Stormpaw thought sourly as he considered Warblerwing's words. "He never said much about harboring anger towards you, though," Stormpaw murmured, then quickly added, "I spend time with him and Dawnstrike sometimes. They've sort of taken me under their guidance, since Wrenfeather gets busy with his deputy duties."

"Oh, that's kind of them," Warblerwing chuckled weakly, breaking off in another cough. "That Dawnstrike has been a good

friend to him. I do wish she'd visit more, too—she's like a daughter to me."

"Maybe I could talk to them," Stormpaw suggested quietly, feeling bad for the sickly golden tabby. "I saw Dovesong getting after Ferrettail for not visiting, but maybe if I take a friendlier approach he'll reconsider."

"Oh, you don't have to do that, Stormpaw," he wheezed in response, and Stormpaw could see a flicker of pain in his eyes. "They're grown warriors, they can make their own choices. And you shouldn't spend your apprenticeship worryin' about the affairs of your Clanmates."

"N-No, I'd like to, Warblerwing," Stormpaw mewed quickly, dipping his head. "Besides, Ferrettail's been hovering outside of the medicine den. I'm sure he wants to check on you."

Warblerwing held the apprentice's gaze for a moment before a grateful look fell on his muzzle. "If you insist, then I'd really appreciate that, Stormpaw. You should be on your way, now. I'm sure Wrenfeather's got some more duties for you."

Stormpaw ducked his head again and moved to retreat out of the medicine den. *Wrenfeather gave me the day off,* he thought to himself, *but I should probably give Warblerwing some space now.* As he started pushing past the curtain of lichen, Stormpaw failed to realize that someone else was about to enter the den, and he ran right into Icepaw.

"Fox-dung!" Icepaw cursed quietly as a bundle of herbs scattered into the den. The sharp language took Stormpaw by surprise, though he quickly tried to compose himself. "Watch where you're going, I just cleaned—" She stopped when she met Stormpaw's startled and apologetic gaze. "Stormpaw, what are you doing here? You're not hurt, are you?"

"No, I'm really sorry, Icepaw," Stormpaw stuttered quickly, spinning around to carefully collect the plants he had caused her to drop. "I was just visiting Warblerwing—I'm *so* sorry, I wasn't looking where I was going."

"It's okay!" Icepaw chirped, leaning forward to tentatively take the herbs from Stormpaw's jaws. She let out a short breath as she did so, and Stormpaw started a bit at the cool, minty-tinged scent that came from her. "Rookshade said that you've been pushing yourself pretty hard, even though it's only been a bit over a moon. You should rest sometimes, Stormpaw."

"I haven't been working *that* hard," Stormpaw breathed out as he stepped away. He held her soft green gaze for a moment before looking back toward the entrance to the den. "Don't worry, I won't overwork myself, Icepaw. Thanks for worrying, though."

Without waiting for the grey molly's response, Stormpaw rushed out of the den. He breathed out a sigh of relief once he was in the fresh air of the main clearing and quickly glanced around for a sign of Ferrettail, though he didn't see the brown-and-white warrior anywhere. Then, Stormpaw spotted Dawnstrike with Sandfoot, and started trotting across the clearing to meet her.

"Stormpaw!" A call from his mentor stopped him in his tracks, and as he turned around, he saw the golden-dappled tom approaching him. "I know I've given you the day off, but what would you say to a little extra training?"

"Extra training?" Stormpaw echoed softly, eyeing Wrenfeather as he neared. "Are you sure? I know you can get busy."

The deputy shuffled his paws a bit, scuffing his single white paw against the layer of pine needles beneath them. "Yeah, I haven't set aside nearly enough time for you. I know you've been taking extra lessons from Dawnstrike and Ferrettail, and I appreciate that they've stepped in to help without thinking twice, but I'm your mentor."

Stormpaw considered the offer for a few moments, glancing back towards Dawnstrike. The cream warrior had caught sight of the apprentice, and her conversation with Sandfoot ceased as she watched him. "Yeah, I guess you have a point," he mewed after a few moments. "Are we leaving to train now?"

"You can take a few moments to get ready," Wrenfeather nodded to him before facing the entrance of the camp. "But it would be

preferable to leave now. I've freed my evening up, so we'll be able to train until sunset—or even moonrise, if you've got the endurance for it." When his mentor's tone took an amused, teasing tone, Stormpaw felt himself grow excited. *We could train all night, and I can impress him with the awesome moves I've learned from Ferrettail, Dawnstrike, and that StarClan cat!*

"I don't have to prepare!" he blurted excitedly before bounding past his mentor and towards the entrance tunnel. "Let's go!"

Chapter Twelve

Author's Note: *Towards the end of the chapter, there are a few lines of dialogue where some letters are replaced with their equivalent in Latin runes, along with a few of the least-annoying Zalgo letters I could muster--I was trying to convey the sound of the dialogue, and hopefully Wattpad doesn't hinder the text too much!*

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Silverpaw yawned as she padded out of the apprentices' den. When she entered the main clearing, she was met with bustling activity from her Clanmates, and remembered that she and Stormpaw were traveling to Starfalls today. A moon had passed, and Wrenfeather said that with how unpredictable leafbare could be, it'd be better to get the visit out of the way. It made sense to Silverpaw—she certainly didn't like the idea of trekking through snow to get there, even if she'd never seen it before.

"Leafbare will be here soon," the deputy had said several sunrises before. "Once it passes, it's possible that you'll both be ready to become warriors. There's no telling how the season will pan out, so it'd be best for us to go now."

While Silverpaw recalled his instructions and blinked the sleep from her eyes, she thought of how the time had passed. Once he started his extra training, Stormpaw had started showing off during legitimate training sessions. Many warriors, including Wrenfeather, were impressed by his sudden progress. He had even learned a move that required him to flip off of a tree to trick and corner an opponent, and whether he learned that from his sleep-training or from Ferrettail and Dawnstrike, Silverpaw didn't know. All she knew was that she felt worried rather than impressed.

Over time, she'd noticed Stormpaw wake up with more scratches. Most of them were small, and easy to hide, but there were a few that Icepaw and Rowanspots had noticed. Every time it was brought up, her brother simply passed it off as a result of

clumsiness.

"Oh, I stumbled into a thicket of thorns while I was hunting. I always forget to watch where I'm going," was always Stormpaw's choice of excuse. Her brother was anything but clumsy, yet somehow the medicine cats bought it.

Despite how worried she became, Silverpaw tried her best to simply trust her brother. If he said it's all for the best in the end, then that had to be true. Besides, she *was* seeing some truth to his words, even if it came with a few negative effects. Along with their Clanmates becoming proud of him, Wrenfeather had become notably closer to his apprentice. Stormpaw had also formed even closer bonds to Ferrettail, Dawnstrike, and Rookshade, and whenever he wasn't with those four, Silverpaw, or Thistlestar, he had become almost as short-tempered as Dawnstrike.

Silverpaw had also seen Icepaw watching him from afar with admiration in her eyes. Every so often, Stormpaw would visit Warblerwing in the medicine den along with Ferrettail—somehow he had convinced the warrior to visit his father, and Icepaw was visibly happy to be in Stormpaw's company. Warblerwing's condition had only worsened over the past moon, though. During the nights, the whole camp could hear the tom's painful coughing fits. Even though Rowanspots hadn't addressed it, Silverpaw knew the warriors were speculating that it was the same incurable illness that had taken the life of an elder from SwiftClan.

The thought of a strange sickness sweeping through the Clans disturbed Silverpaw enough to drive her mind back into focus. Right when she scanned the camp in front of her, she spotted the familiar golden-dappled pelt of Wrenfeather as he approached her.

"Silverpaw, could I have a word with you?" he asked quietly, his emotions guarded safely behind a straight face.

"Sure," Silverpaw nodded hesitantly, feeling worry prickle through her pelt as she followed Wrenfeather away from curious ears. "Is something wrong?"

"No, I'm sure it's nothing," the deputy responded slowly, his

impassable expression finally giving way to a look of concern. "It's just—I know that you're closest to Stormpaw. Lately, I've been noticing scratches on his pelt, and—forgive me if I'm simply prying too much—it looks like he ruffled his fur to hide them. Do you know anything about this?"

Silverpaw was taken aback by the question, though she was careful not to let her surprise show as she offered a swift response. "Ah, yeah. This is *really* embarrassing for Stormpaw, so don't tell him I told you, but he's a lot clumsier when others aren't around. He keeps tripping against sharp stones and has gotten caught in *so* many rose bushes!"

Wrenfeather's concern was replaced by a look of amusement, and he twitched his whiskers in his silent laughter. "And the embarrassment is keeping him from telling me or seeking treatment, of *course.* Thank you, Silverpaw, and don't worry, I won't say a word to him unless it gets worse."

With a grateful nod, Wrenfeather padded away to meet Newtsplash and Cindertalon. Silverpaw breathed a sigh of relief as he left and made a mental note to tell Stormpaw once they had a moment alone. Before she could search for her brother, however, Cricketpaw had approached her. His crestfallen posture caught her eye, and Silverpaw quickly questioned her friend.

"Cricketpaw? What's wrong?" she asked, stepping closer to him.

"It's nothing serious," the brown tabby responded quickly. He seemed to realize how he was carrying himself and grew embarrassed as he explained it. "I finally talked to my dad, and he said we can't leave camp without our mentors, and if it isn't a patrol then it'd be a waste of time, so . . . ."

"That's too bad," Silverpaw responded quietly, saddened that she couldn't see the cool spot with Cricketpaw. "Maybe once we're both warriors, we can go together! Warriors are always allowed to go *hunting* even without a patrol!" With a joking purr, Silverpaw nudged her denmate, and felt her heart lift when he brightened up.

"Yeah!" Cricketpaw nodded furiously, "Let's do it!"

They both let out joyful purrs at their future plans, and as they did, Cindertalon padded over from his spot with Wrenfeather. Silverpaw quickly silenced herself and looked to her mentor, wondering if she had forgotten something.

"Have you visited Icepaw and Rowanspots for your traveling herbs?" Cindertalon's words caused a wave of realization to flow over Silverpaw, and her ears quickly heated up with embarrassment when she realized what her mentor was doing. His amber eyes were knowing; he knew that she hadn't received her herbs yet, and the warrior was trying to remind her without embarrassing her in front of her denmate.

"Ah, no, I was just about to see them!" Silverpaw mewed and ducked her head to him before turning to Cricketpaw again. "I'll see you after our trip to Starfalls—and I'll be sure to remember every bug I see on the way there."

She quickly trotted toward the medicine den. Once outside, Silverpaw caught the scent of her brother, but before she could enter the den to greet him, he nosed his way through the lichen curtain.

"Careful," Stormpaw warned playfully when he met her gaze. "The herbs we have to take were the most bitter thing I've ever had to taste!"

Silverpaw rolled her eyes lightheartedly and nudged her brother before entering the medicine den. Inside, she saw Rowanspots rummaging through a messy pile of various herbs. Their scents mingled in the air, tickling Silverpaw's nostrils and nearly tempting a sneeze out of her. They also hid the scent of sickness coming from Warblerwing's sleeping form, tucked away towards the back of the den. Not far from Rowanspots was Icepaw, who watched her mentor curiously.

"Hey, Rowanspots and Icepaw," Silverpaw greeted them hesitantly after eyeing them for a moment. "I'm here for my traveling herbs."

Rowanspots sent a glance upward from her activities, then one

toward Icepaw. "Icepaw, take care of that, please. I need to make sure none of our stashes haven't gone bad—one bad leaf could ruin the whole batch, and Warblerwing needs the best we can find."

"Yes, Rowanspots!" Icepaw chirped as she jumped to her paws. The grey molly vanished around her mentor's form briefly before reappearing with a bundle of herbs hanging from her teeth. When she approached Silverpaw, the fluffy molly eyed the medicine cat apprentice for a moment before getting an idea.

"I saw that Stormpaw was already here," Silverpaw mewed softly as she eyed the herbs Icepaw placed at her paws. Then, she raised her gaze to meet the other apprentice's soft green eyes.

"Y-Yeah, he was," Icepaw stammered, nudging the traveling herbs closer to Silverpaw. "Here—eat these. They're going to taste bitter, so consider yourself warned."

"Did he say much?" Silverpaw pressed nonchalantly, though she couldn't lie to herself—it was amusing to see Icepaw stumble on her words over the little crush she'd so obviously formed on Stormpaw. While she waited for a response, Silverpaw leaned over to consume the herbs as directed, ignoring the poor taste they left on her tongue.

"No, not really," Icepaw's voice was a soft murmur this time. "He seems like he's been training extra hard lately, though." Something else hid behind the admiration in her voice, but Silverpaw couldn't place what it was.

"He really has been," Silverpaw responded smoothly. "Even Wasppaw was impressed, and that's not done easily."

"My brothers would always mention how ill-tempered *he* is. Especially Falconwing—those two butted heads more times than I could count." As she recalled her brothers' recent apprenticeships, Icepaw let out a soft laugh. Around the grey molly's form, Silverpaw caught a sharp glance from Rowanspots and took it as her cue to leave.

"They sure did," Silverpaw ducked her head as she spoke,

suddenly feeling bad for keeping the medicine cat apprentice occupied. Somehow, she felt like that wasn't the reason for the medicine cat's stare. "I should be going—I'm sure Cindertalon, Wrenfeather, and Stormpaw are all waiting for me."

Silverpaw quickly exited the den, flicking her ears as she heard Icepaw utter a farewell. Sure enough, her mentor and the deputy were waiting patiently by the bramble tunnel with Stormpaw nearby. She immediately caught Cindertalon's beckoning glance and rushed across the clearing to them. Then, once the mentors were certain the siblings were ready, they led them out of the camp and towards the RushClan border.

It wasn't long before Silverpaw could hear the sounds of the river, and shortly afterwards she could make out the sheen of the water through gaps in the undergrowth. *I hope RushClan doesn't suffer too much when the water starts to freeze,* she thought apprehensively as she remembered what she had been told about leafbare. Once the snow starts to fall, water sources will start to freeze. RushClan would suffer the most from a long leafbare, since most of their food came from the fish that lived in the river.

"Are you two excited to see Starfalls?" Wrenfeather asked, his tone unusually formal and polite. "I know how excited I was when I was an apprentice."

"Absolutely!" Stormpaw spoke up while Silverpaw considered her response. The grey tom swiped at a tall fern as they passed by, adding, "Rookshade told me you can almost *feel* the presence of StarClan in the air!"

Rookshade never struck me as a cat with a connection to the ancestors, Silverpaw thought curiously, forgetting to answer the question. *I feel like that would be pretty special—a former rogue having a sense for those things. Then again, his sister* was *chosen by Rowanspots.*

"What about you, Silverpaw?" Cindertalon mewed, interrupting her thoughts. "Are you excited?"

"Yeah, of course I am!" she chirped and twitched her whiskers.

"Cricketpaw said it's like another land entirely!" Both of the warriors let out amused purrs of agreement, but Silverpaw didn't miss the way Stormpaw rolled his eyes at the mention of their denmate. *Maybe they had some kind of disagreement,* she thought, growing a bit wary. She quickly buried her worries, however, as they finally broke through the wall of foliage that hid most of the river from sight.

Wrenfeather took a hard left, leading them upwards along the edge of the river—towards their destination. Silverpaw heard a commotion across the river before they got far, though. She turned her head to see a patrol of RushClan cats on the shoreline of the island that the river forked around. In the group of cats, she saw a light brown tom and a dark grey-and-white tom, along with a dark yellow tabby she recognized from the Gathering. She also recognized Lilypaw, who trotted along with a fish clamped firmly in her teeth.

Just as Silverpaw was about to point them out, Wrenfeather slowed them to a halt and raised his tail as he called out a greeting. "Greetings, Troutslip and friends. Nice weather for fishing, it seems."

"Well, well, if it isn't Wrenfeather!" the grey-and-white tom responded quickly, amusement and friendliness echoing off of his voice. Silverpaw swallowed down her bubbling uneasiness when she realized it was as if the tension between Thistlestar and Wolfstar was just that—between them. "We don't often see NightClan patrols this far along the river. What brings you out this way?"

"Ah, we're taking our apprentices to see Starfalls," Wrenfeather waved his tail toward Silverpaw and Stormpaw as he spoke. "We wanted to get it taken care of before leafbare hits—you know how it is."

"Hi, Lilypaw!" Silverpaw called out as soon as the deputy stopped speaking. The light brown molly perked up at her call, but before Silverpaw could get a response, she saw Wrenfeather's ears perk up.

"So *that's* the Lilypaw my son has been mooning over," he commented. Deep in his green eyes was a hint of amusement, and Silverpaw remembered how he had siblings in SwiftClan. She saw Lilypaw freeze at his words, however, and regretted calling out to her. The feeling only worsened when the light brown tom spoke up.

"The handsome apprentice you've been carrying on about is the son of the NightClan deputy?" When the tom spoke, he shot a knowing gaze toward the NightClan cats. Even from across the river Silverpaw could see amusement on his muzzle.

"Dad, shut up!" Lilypaw sputtered out, her fur bristling up with embarrassment. "Reedtuft, tell them to quit it!"

The dark yellow tabby let out a laugh as he came to the apprentice's defense. "All right, you two, let's cut her some slack. Especially you, Mudbreath—StarClan knows you tease your kits more than enough."

"Okay, okay," the light brown tom caved, though his darker-colored ears stayed playfully perked. "I suppose we don't wanna keep those apprentices waiting, either. They must be excited to see Starfalls for the first time."

"That they are," Wrenfeather responded with a glance at Cindertalon, who had remained silent during the exchange. Then he looked to the sun vanishing over the horizon. "It's about time we start moving, anyways. Good hunting to you all!"

"Good hunting!" the RushClan cats called back as Wrenfeather led them further along the river.

As the NightClan cats padded further along the river, they trailed away from the water's edge and back into the shelter of the undergrowth. Silverpaw stayed quiet as she watched the behavior of the toms she accompanied. Cindertalon's amber gaze was fixed on the forest ahead of them, as if he were deep in thought. Wrenfeather had pulled Stormpaw ahead and was talking to him about his training.

Admittedly, the sight made Silverpaw worried about her *own*

training. Even though they still had several moons to go, she could already tell that she wouldn't be the best hunter in the Clan. Their prey spotted her pale silver fur easily, even when hiding in thick foliage; even with Cindertalon's expert guidance. Her combat could use some work, too, though Silverpaw knew she was doing exponentially better in that field.

Suddenly, Cindertalon fell back to walk by her side. His amber eyes were softened as he fixed his sights on the apprentice. "What's going on in that head of yours?" he asked quietly, and Silverpaw mentally thanked him for not drawing attention to her.

"I'm just thinking of what Starfalls could be like," she mumbled, struggling to hold her mentor's gaze. Technically, it wasn't a lie—ever since they had left the camp, Cricketpaw's words echoed behind her more dominant thoughts. Unfortunately, though, her words didn't seem to convince the warrior by her side.

"As your mentor, it's my job to notice when something is troubling you," Cindertalon continued with a glance toward the two toms ahead of them. "Especially when others don't sense it. Forgive me if I'm prying too much, but is it the situation with your—"

"No," Silverpaw quickly cut him off with a shake of her head. She knew exactly what he was going to say, and Mintwillow was the last cat she wanted to talk about. "I was worrying about my training."

"Your training?" Cindertalon echoed, confusion visible in his eyes. Then, he glanced ahead to Stormpaw's form. "I hope you're not comparing yourself to the other apprentices; you've been progressing just fine, Silverpaw."

"Have I, though?" she murmured, finally looking away as she saw tendrils of mist start to creep through the undergrowth. "I've got to be the worst hunter in the Clan right now—I can hardly catch half as much as the others when we hunt!"

Cindertalon's tone became sympathetic, and he gave his apprentice an encouraging nudge. "You know, being a good hunter isn't all that matters for a warrior. You've been thriving in

everything else, and if I'm being honest, it's not that you're a bad hunter. You can't control your pelt, and I'd say that's the biggest issue for you."

"What if I fail my assessment because I have such a hard time with it, though?" Silverpaw countered, fixing her mentor with her rounded blue gaze.

"Silverpaw—!" Cindertalon's own eyes widened briefly with shock before he covered it up again with a reassuring expression. "You won't fail just because you don't hunt well, I can promise you that. You've shown that you understand the code, and you can more than hold your own in battle. I know you don't feel the same, but I have total faith in your future as a warrior. Now, look—" when Silverpaw opened her mouth to respond, her mentor beckoned to the two toms ahead of them, who had both stopped in their tracks "—we're here."

Silverpaw looked around and held back a gasp of surprise. Last she had noticed, the mist weaving through the trees only held the form of thin, wispy tendrils—now it was a thick layer above the forest floor, glittering with what she could only describe as stardust from Silverpelt. She could hear the crashing of water echoing from up ahead, but the sight of it was hidden by large-leaved ferns and plants. Stormpaw had frozen in his spot ahead of her, and beside him, Wrenfeather looked amused.

The golden-dappled tom then glanced back toward Cindertalon and Silverpaw before leading the way through the foliage. Cindertalon was quick to follow after him, beckoning for the siblings to follow him with his tail.

"Are you ready?" Silverpaw whispered to her brother as she padded forward to stand by his side. "Do you . . . do you think you'll be visited by that cat here?"

"Hush!" Stormpaw hissed quickly, though his eyes held no anger. "I haven't told Wrenfeather about that yet—only Dawnstrike knows, I think."

"You *think?"* Silverpaw echoed, growing skeptical of her brother

for a moment. Then, she gave a sigh and a shrug of her shoulders. "Alright, if you say so." She playfully ficked his shoulder with her tail before finally pushing aside the leaves that blocked her path, and what lied ahead of her amazed her.

Water cascaded down from a series of ledges into a pool that reflected the earliest twinkles of starlight. The shroud of mist was thickest here, churned into existence by the crashing water and sparkling just like the pool in front of them. If Silverpaw didn't know better, she'd have said that StarClan themselves had descended from Silverpelt to visit.

Near the edge of the pool she heard Cindertalon clear his throat meaningfully, and Silverpaw slowly made her way to his side. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Stormpaw mimic her movements to sit between her and Wrenfeather, who'd found a spot nearest the waterfall.

"Are we too early, Wrenfeather?" Cindertalon asked cautiously with a glance toward the sky. Hints of orange still showed at the edge of the sky, mixing with the lighter blues of the early night sky before they turned dark. Silverpaw tilted her head as she observed it, noticing how every moment she could see more twinkles hidden in the vast blue screen.

"No, we're perfectly on time," Wrenfeather responded with a thoughtful hum. "Stormpaw, Silverpaw, crouch near the very edges of the pool. Then, close your eyes and touch your muzzles to the water."

"It's that simple?" Stormpaw blurted, and Silverpaw caught a glance he sent in her direction.

"Just do it," Silverpaw whispered to him when she noticed Wrenfeather frown at her brother's words. She gave him a soft nudge before she obeyed the deputy's instructions. Slowly, she closed her eyes and leaned forward to touch her muzzle to the water.

The contact of the water, at first, sent chills through her body. Silverpaw immediately lost the sensation of her brother and her

mentor on either side of her, or the feeling of solid ground beneath her paws. When she opened her eyes, she was faced with pitch blackness—space so dark that she wondered if she had truly opened her eyes.

While her sight was gone, and any sensation of land had vanished, a strange, indistinct murmur tickled the fur of her ears. At first, Silverpaw couldn't make out what the sound was, though she thought she recognized it. After some time, Silverpaw was able to pick out words from the sound. To put together coherent sentences, she had to concentrate harder than she ever had before.

"Tᚺey will coᚱrupᛏ the Cᛚans. Don't leᛏ them s̃way yᛟu."

The sound, even though Silverpaw knew it was some cat's voice, came across as strange and distorted. It was as if whoever was speaking was struggling to reach her—or they were deliberately keeping distance. She wanted to call out and ask what it meant, but when she opened her mouth to respond, nothing came out. In this darkness, she felt entirely alone, and the strange voice didn't help the feeling.

"A storᛗ is ᛒrewing, and the darᚳness will cᛟme for those with ᛏuᚱᛗoil within their ᚺearts."

Immediately, Silverpaw thought of the dreams where she had woken up in The Place of No Stars—and of Snowface, the creepy tom who had wanted to train her. The thought made her stomach churn, and when she reminded herself that Stormpaw *still* trained with who he insisted was a StarClan cat, Silverpaw felt herself grow nauseous. *This is bad,* she told herself, kicking her legs out at the empty darkness. *I need to tell Stormpaw—those cats are definitely bad news.*

Right before she regained consciousness, Silverpaw remembered what Wrenfeather had said at the very start of their apprenticeships.

"Do warrior apprentices dream like the medicine cats do?" Silverpaw had asked, mystified by the thought of speaking to their ancestors.

If only she had known that StarClan was not the only afterlife—and that those outside of StarClan could harbor malicious feelings toward the Clans.

"Only rarely," Wrenfeather had replied with a muffled laugh, as if the mere thought of a warrior *apprentice getting special dreams was preposterous. "StarClan hasn't even been talking to the medicine cats so much lately."*

In the fleeting moments between the lightless dream-world and the waking world, Silverpaw decided to act as if nothing had happened. Then, once they were away from prying ears, she'd tell Stormpaw about what she heard. Maybe he'd listen for once and stop the extra training with the nameless molly—no, surely he would.

Chapter Thirteen

Silverpaw padded through the frost-tinged undergrowth, her mouth parted for any traces of the dawn patrol. On the trip back from Starfalls, Cindertalon and Wrenfeather would hardly give her the space to speak to her brother—nor would they in the days to follow. She'd barely had a moment to breathe, let alone tell her brother what she had heard.

That was life until now, at least. Silverpaw had been sent on a hunting patrol with Cindertalon, Rookshade, and, of course, Mintwillow. Normally, she'd try—and fail—to catch a decent amount of prey, but this patrol was different. She knew that Stormpaw had been assigned to the dawn patrol with Wrenfeather, Sandfoot, and Daisynose, and with Daisynose's wheezing worsening with the colder weather, the patrol would have to travel slowly. It would be the perfect opportunity to pull Stormpaw away for a moment and talk to him.

Rookshade and Cindertalon would be too focused on their hunting to worry about her whereabouts, and judging by Mintwillow's increasing avoidance of them after telling them the reasoning for her behavior, her mother would hardly care, either. Regardless, Silverpaw glanced over her shoulder and followed the hint of a scent trail she had picked up, trying her best to stay downwind and out of sight. Within no time at all, she tracked down the patrol and saw that her brother was trailing at the far rear of the group. *He set this up for me perfectly,* she thought, twitching her whiskers with amusement. *Yet he doesn't even know that I'm here to tell him what I know.*

"Psst!" Silverpaw hissed quietly when she was within earshot. "Stormpaw, over here!"

Stormpaw perked his ears immediately and lifted his head. He faced away from Silverpaw—towards the warriors of the patrol. Daisynose had slowed to a stop, and while Sandfoot checked on her, Wrenfeather scouted a little ways ahead. Then, Stormpaw turned

away and crept towards Silverpaw's hiding spot. She peeked her head out of the tall ferns to meet him and beckoned to him with a sharp nod of her head.

"What are you doing here?" Stormpaw hissed incredulously, though Silverpaw thought she saw amusement swimming in his jade eyes. "You're supposed to be on a hunting patrol!"

Silverpaw couldn't help herself as she rolled her eyes. "What I have to tell you is more important than the few scrawny mice I would have caught," she retorted a bit playfully. "You know I'm a terrible hunter."

"What's so important that you had me sneak away from my patrol to hear?" Stormpaw scoffed a bit, though his ears perked curiously towards his sister. Immediately, Silverpaw leaned forward, ready to tell him the information she'd been holding back for several sunrises.

"At Starfalls, I had a *dream,"* she whispered hurriedly. "Well, it was sort of a dream—I was surrounded by darkness, but then I heard this voice. You know what it said?"

"That you have bees for brains?" Stormpaw snorted and tried to give his sister a playful cuff over her ear. Silverpaw ducked around it quickly and let out a huff of annoyance.

"I'm being *serious,* Storm!" Silverpaw muttered with a glance toward the border patrol. "The voice said there's a storm coming, and that the *darkness* will come for cats with turmoil in their hearts!"

"Okay, and?" Stormpaw tilted his head, looking confused. "Why'd you have to tell me in secret like this? Just tell Rowanspots or something."

Silverpaw let out another frustrated huff and fixed her with a serious look. "I had to tell you in private because I want you to stop your sleep-training! Those cats are bad news, and they're *not* trying to help you." Stormpaw looked taken aback for a moment before he narrowed his eyes.

"What are you talking about?" he snapped quickly, disbelief flaring in his eyes. "Nothing you said points to them being bad!"

"No, it does!" Silverpaw insisted desperately. "When they tried to train me, the tom who came to me—Snowface, he said that he could notice the *turmoil in my heart.* That *can't* be a coincidence!"

"It certainly is," Stormpaw grumbled quickly, his disbelief turning into an anger that made Silverpaw feel uneasy. "You know how important my training is to me! How could you ask me to stop?"

"Because they're *bad news,"* Silverpaw insisted weakly, holding her brother's gaze. "The fact that the molly in your dreams told you to seek out the rogues—no, the fact that she won't even tell you her *name* is suspicious enough! Those cats are in that forest for a reason."

"You don't know anything," Stormpaw growled quietly. "You don't even know the cat that took you out of there, or the one that spoke to you at Starfalls, do you?"

"I– I don't think that cat *could* reveal their identity," Silverpaw stammered as she realized she was just as guilty as her brother. "And I told you, at Starfalls, it was nothing but pitch black."

"Excuses," Stormpaw muttered, rolling his eyes. "I won't stop my training with her, Silverpaw. You may think it's bad, but it will turn me into a stronger warrior. I told you to just trust me."

"I can't trust those words when I just confirmed that they're no good," Silverpaw mewed slowly, trying to measure her words before she spoke them.

"You don't trust me?" Stormpaw gasped softly, looking hurt. "Silverpaw, I'm doing this for both of us."

"I never said that I don't trust *you,"* Silverpaw hissed quickly when Stormpaw grew upset. "I can't trust that this training is good for you—"

A sudden screech broke through Silverpaw's words, and both she

and her brother rushed toward the sound, ducking through the undergrowth until they found Cindertalon cornered by three rogues. In the middle, a tiny black-and-white tom snarled at Silverpaw's mentor, and he was flanked by two mollies; one pale brown, the other brown with dark ginger markings. Cindertalon faced them bravely despite having his back against a tree.

As soon as she peeked through the undergrowth, Silverpaw caught Cindertalon's gaze and felt herself freeze up. Then, the dark grey tom gave her the tiniest of nods. Not a word needed to be spoken for her to understand what she needed to do.

"Stormpaw," she whispered under her breath, trying not to alert the rogues that threatened Cindertalon. "When Cindertalon signals it, we attack. Got it?"

"W-What?" Stormpaw hissed in response, flicking his tail hesitantly. "Shouldn't we fetch reinforcements? Wrenfeather had to have heard the yowling as well, he'll be here any moment—or Rookshade, I know he was on the hunting patrol with you!"

"I have a feeling Rookshade is already nearby," Silverpaw muttered quickly, her eyes locked on her mentor's form. "You'll know the signal when you see it—just do it, Stormpaw!" As she spoke, Cindertalon reached down to the loose earth beneath his paws before thrusting a pawful of it into the air and straight into the eyes of the rogues. *I know he'd never be cornered so easily!* Silverpaw thought, and she bunched her muscles up before launching herself out of the shadows. Beside her, Stormpaw gave a surprised gasp, but he didn't move to help quite yet.

Once she faced the now-furious rogues, she realized that Cindertalon's trick had only caught the two mollies by surprise. The small-framed tom growled and quickly picked up on Silverpaw's presence, turning his body to keep them both in his sights.

"That's the oldest trick in the book," he snarled, his claws unsheathed and glinting in the early sunlight. "You'd have to be a mouse-brain to fall for that. And for what, a single fledgling to come to your aid?"

"Badger, shut up and *attack* them!" the pale brown molly hissed, her green eyes glinting as she blinked the debris out of them. "And remember what Shade said!"

The tom rolled his softer green eyes and, without another word lunged at Cindertalon while his accomplices recovered from their temporary blindness. Silverpaw moved to leap to her mentor's side, only to be cut off by the pale brown molly. She towered threateningly over Silverpaw, and soon the other molly joined her. *Stormpaw, hurry up and get out here!* she thought desperately. As soon as she thought it, she felt a presence at her side, but when she turned she saw the familiar black pelt of Rookshade instead of her brother. The older tom nodded encouragingly at Silverpaw and fell into a defensive stance.

"I thought I could make the fight fair," he murmured half-jokingly as he turned his amber gaze onto the mollies in front of them. "Surely two grown rogues fighting a new apprentice is a bit overkill—or perhaps you're lacking a moral compass, considering how you cornered my father here?"

Silverpaw narrowed her eyes at them and noticed how they exchanged an exasperated glance. Without a warning, they lunged at her and Rookshade with their claws and teeth bared. Silverpaw let out a gasp and ducked away from the brown-and-ginger molly's claws, immediately searching for an opening. Beside her, Rookshade and the pale brown molly fought with claws flying, though each looked to be more defensive than offensive. Quickly, she returned her focus to her opponent and swiped beneath the molly's towering form, trying to throw her off balance.

Suddenly, the rogue let out a snarl of annoyance and dealt a powerful blow to the side of Silverpaw's face. Though the impact stung and sent her reeling a few pawsteps back, somehow it drew no blood. Before Silverpaw could recover from the blow, yowls rang through the trees—voices she recognized. She shook her head to clear her daze and looked up to see Wrenfeather and Sandfoot rushing into sight with Stormpaw close behind them.

By the time her Clanmates could launch their attacks, the rogues had already started to retreat. They fled into the forest with their

tails streaming behind them; the fight, as quickly as it had started, was over.

"We must return to camp immediately," Wrenfeather ordered as soon as they were out of sight. "Cindertalon, gather your patrol and any prey that was caught. I want you all seen by Rowanspots upon your return. Sandfoot, return to Daisynose and ensure she gets back to camp safely. Stormpaw, with me."

Without another word, and without waiting for a response, Wrenfeather bounded in the direction of the camp. Cindertalon cleared his throat and padded up to Silverpaw. He beckoned Rookshade over with his tail, and once his son was near, he fixed them both with a serious gaze.

"Go together and collect any prey that you've caught. I'm going to collect mine and find out where Mintwillow went off to—it's odd that she hasn't shown up yet." Cindertalon raised his head and surveyed the wall of undergrowth that surrounded them. "Don't leave one another's side, and if you encounter another of those rogues, drop your prey and run back to camp. Understood?"

"Yes, Cindertalon," Silverpaw mewed quickly, her ears growing hot as she remembered that she hadn't caught a thing. Rookshade offered a silent nod from beside her, and then Cindertalon stalked off into the forest, his ears perked for the slightest sound of danger.

"Let's collect yours, first," Rookshade offered once his father had vanished from sight. "I stored mine in a hollow tree close to the camp, so we can get it on the way."

"I actually didn't catch anything," Silverpaw said quickly with a shrug. "I'm still having trouble learning how to hide properly, s-so I scared off everything I saw." Even though it was a blatant lie, Silverpaw tried her best to sound convincing. When Rookshade eyed her for a moment, she grew worried and wondered if he had seen through her bluff.

"Okay," he chirped suddenly and took up a swift pace toward the camp. "That makes our return faster, then. You didn't get hurt, did you?"

Silverpaw noticed how the tom eyed her out of the corner of his eye and set her gaze straight ahead of them. "No. I only got hit once, but it wasn't bad. Why?"

"Just checking." Rookshade stopped once they reached the tree he mentioned and reached a paw inside to pull out a vole and a dove. "I didn't want to set too fast a pace for you or anything, even if we did just get attacked." Then he picked the prey up in his jaws and resumed their swift pace. He didn't say another word until they returned to the camp, and neither did Silverpaw; sometimes the black-furred tom seemed so unapproachable in his casual silence.

Once outside the bramble tunnel, they stopped and checked for evidence of Cindertalon and Mintwillow's return. Silverpaw stifled her unease when she didn't detect a trace of their scents and, after sending Rookshade a glance, she entered the camp. Inside the clearing, cats were gathered, their worried voices filling the air as they fretted about what had happened. Thistlestar stood in the center of the camp with Wrenfeather at his side, his wispy-furred tail tip twitching as he awaited the return of the patrols.

"Silverpaw, Rookshade—where are Cindertalon and Mintwillow?" Wrenfeather demanded as soon as he saw them. The deputy rushed forward while Stormpaw sat back, his green eyes glittering with uneasiness.

"Cindertalon sent us to collect our prey while he looked for Mintwillow," Rookshade explained with a glance at Silverpaw, who shuffled her paws and looked back toward the camp entrance. *Where are they?* she worried.

"What do you mean?" Thistlestar spoke this time, bounding forward worriedly. "Is Mintwillow missing?"

"Well, we split up to hunt," Silverpaw spoke slowly, her uncle's behavior unnerving her. "As one does. When the rogues attacked Cindertalon, though, she's the only one who didn't show up."

Before Thistlestar or Wrenfeather could respond, Cindertalon appeared through the main entrance. A few pieces of prey hung from his mouth, but he was alone. He hesitated when the attention

of the Clan fell to him, but recovered quickly and set his prey at his paws.

"I couldn't find Mintwillow, but I was able to pick up on her scent trail. There was no sign of blood so I decided to return," the dark grey warrior spoke, surprisingly calm and collected after what had just happened. "After being attacked by rogues, it seemed better to have a search party rather than a single cat searching."

The clearing fell silent—so silent, in fact, that Silverpaw could make out the faint coughing of Warblerwing and Vinecrawl from the medicine den. The younger molly had joined him shortly after the apprentices returned from Starfalls, though according to Rowanspots and Icepaw, Vinecrawl was much more receptive to treatment. Warblerwing's condition, however, continued to worsen as time passed.

"Very well," Thistlestar spoke suddenly, his tone bearing an unusual coolness. "Newtsplash, Ferrettail, and Sandfoot, I want you to search for Mintwillow. Cindertalon, are you injured?"

"No, sir," Cindertalon responded, ducking his head to the leader. "I've a few scratches, but I'm not urgently in need of treatment."

"Follow them from the shadows. Stay out of sight and make sure they come back unscathed—I don't want another ambush on my warriors." Thistlestar gave a glance to each of the warriors he called out, and they quickly filed out of the camp. Cindertalon quickly carried his prey to the fresh-kill pile and deposited it before following their Clanmates.

"Rookshade, Silverpaw, deposit your fresh-kill and see Rowanspots for any wounds you have." Thistlestar turned to them, and when Silverpaw met his gaze, she saw just how stressed he had become. She decided against telling him she had no prey, nor any wounds to be seen; instead, she shared an uneasy glance with Rookshade and sent it to Stormpaw as they passed him. He, like the rest of their Clanmates, had remained silent. However, while *they* provided a stunned silence, Stormpaw's silence was more of an uneasy, yet stormy one.

"Thistlestar, we need to warn the other Clans," Wrenfeather spoke up as the young cats made their way toward the medicine den. Rowanspots was quick to meet them outside; now that *two* elders were sick in her den, she didn't want the rest of the camp entering it out of the fear that they'd pass the sickness onto the other elders.

"And have Wolfstar throw his disdain in our faces again?" Thistlestar snapped, startling Silverpaw while Rowanspots checked her over. She'd become painfully aware of how much distance Rowanspots tried to keep while inspecting her. "I won't tolerate his behavior any longer, Wrenfeather."

"He's old and probably senile. You know that the other Clans are on our side." Wrenfeather idly twitched his tail tip as he spoke, and Silverpaw noticed how the remaining warriors nodded in agreement. *He's right,* she thought, noticing how Rookshade sent a glance in her direction when he thought she wasn't looking. No, maybe he had hoped for her to catch the look he gave her.

"What about Mintwillow?" Mistypool asked quietly from Daisynose's side. "What if they don't find her—what will we say if someone asks?" For a moment, Silverpaw felt a pang of pity for her grandmother. Having your daughter disappear into thin air like this, it had to be terrifying for the old molly.

Thistlestar hesitated, conflict apparent in his amber eyes. "Cindertalon said he saw no blood on her scent trail. If she doesn't come back, then we can only assume that she left of her own volition."

"So, what? We just keep her disappearance to ourselves?" Daisynose spoke up this time, her breathing less ragged than usual.

". . . for now, we do. I'll send out more search parties if they don't find her, but I know Mintwillow. If she's gone, it's of her own free will, and she wouldn't go with the rogues without putting up a fight." Thistlestar looked away from his mother and her sister. His tone seemed dark to Silverpaw, as if he knew more about this than he was letting on.

"Thistlestar," Rowanspots spoke up this time as she moved on to check Rookshade for wounds. "I know she's your sister, but the timing is . . . ."

"I know." Thistlestar let out an exasperated huff as he looked to the medicine cat. In doing so, Silverpaw caught his gaze for a moment, and when she did, it almost felt *apologetic*. "I know how it looks, and that's why we aren't going to tell the other Clans yet. I just need you all to trust me."

Just as he said that, the search party he sent out returned through the camp entrance. Sandfoot led them, followed closely by Ferrettail and Newtsplash, and then Cindertalon. Immediately, the Clan turned their full attention onto the warriors. Silverpaw looked them over and noticed that Mintwillow wasn't with them, and that they each shared the same dark expression. *She really just . . . left, then?* she questioned in her head before turning her gaze back to her uncle. *Just how much* did *you know?*

"Mintwillow's scent trail led out of the territory," Sandfoot addressed Thistlestar before anybody could ask what they found. "To the north. There was no sign of blood, nor any fear-scent, and none of us picked up traces of rogues on the trail."

Quickly, the clearing erupted into worried chatter, and many threw questions at Thistlestar, As it progressed, Silverpaw became lost in her own worries—so much so that she nearly forgot the friendly, carefree mask she tried so hard to keep up. She let her gaze travel to Stormpaw and found that he had stopped by to speak to Rookshade after Rowanspots left them. His jade eyes were unusually dark and angry, and a scowl rested on his face as he spoke under his breath to his friend.

"Stormpaw," Silverpaw murmured in an attempt to catch her brother's attention. She crept a bit closer to him, wanting to connect with her brother again. After their short-lived argument earlier, she desperately needed to clear the air. Instead of responding to her, however, Stormpaw rose to his paws and walked away without sparing her a glance. Silverpaw held back a frown as she watched her brother approach Dawnstrike at the other side of the clearing. She noticed how as soon the two started talking, Ferrettail seemed

to gravitate toward them.

"Hey," Rookshade mumbled suddenly, startling Silverpaw. "Are you okay?"

"Me?" Silverpaw responded quickly, feigning ignorance as she offered him a friendly glance. "Of course I am."

Rookshade only offered a doubtful huff before he pressed. "Are you sure? I know your mother was already being unfair to you and Stormpaw. This can't be easy."

With a start, Silverpaw realized that her brother must have told him—if not, it wasn't like the entire Clan didn't already know about their family drama. She quickly looked away from Rookshade and offered a nonchalant shrug of her shoulders before saying, firmly, "All I care about is the fact that we finally found the truth."

"You didn't get good treatment, though," Rookshade retorted casually, though there was a new bite to his words. *I am* not *discussing this right now,* Silverpaw thought quickly as she put up an emotional guard to deflect his words. However, her desire to drop the conversation then and there was far outweighed but her sudden flare of what felt like anger at the thought of her mother.

"I never asked for good treatment," Silverpaw countered after a moment of thought, finally turning to meet Rookshade's gaze again. His amber eyes hardened suddenly, though he stayed still where he sat.

"You deserved it." His voice carried a deeper intent with it, something that Silverpaw couldn't quite place, though the feeling it gave her made her look away.

She kept her mouth shut, though her mind was racing for a response and her heart stuttered in her chest. What was she even supposed to say to that? What *could* she say? Instead of speaking, she only stared at a cluster of pine needles on the floor of the clearing. *Did I deserve it, though?* she thought, her worries starting to gnaw at her. *The rogue Mintwillow mentioned—I can't even begin to imagine what that felt like for her. Then to have two kits that look so*

much like him . . . would I act any differently?

"I'm sorry," Rookshade murmured after a moment. "I went too far—I shouldn't have said all of that."

"N-No," Silverpaw stammered, the frailty of her own voice surprising her. "It's fine. Thank you, Rookshade."

After that, they fell silent, but neither of them made a move to leave. It was a somewhat comfortable silence, but eventually it grew awkward, and once again Silverpaw found herself searching for something to say. Rookshade seemed to shift where he sat, and when she looked at him, she realized that his amber eyes were traveling slowly over the clearing, as if he were monitoring the conversations and behaviors of everybody else.

"Did the rogues hurt you at all?" Silverpaw asked hesitantly, looking over his pelt. She thought of how, even though the blow to her face during the fight was strong, the rogues drew no blood.

"I have a few small scratches, but it was nothing serious," Rookshade responded slowly, turning his gaze on her again. "You didn't get hurt, didn't you?"

"Yeah," she murmured in response, not registering how he didn't even have to ask if she was hurt. "It's . . . a little weird, isn't it? Why are they staging these attacks if we aren't really getting hurt?"

"Maybe they want our attention for something," Rookshade mused thoughtfully. "Remember what you said after the last attack?"

Silverpaw thought for a moment, searching her memory for the words she had uttered. "Yeah, I do. I still think they had help, somehow."

"So do I." His sudden validation of her own suspicions took Silverpaw by surprise, and the feeling was apparently evident on her face as he continued. "They must have something tying them to NightClan—otherwise, the more realistic targets would be BlazeClan, RushClan, or even MistClan. They want something from

us, but they aren't trying to hurt us—and they've found ways through our territory without raising our suspicions until they attack."

"Who do you think is helping them, then?" Silverpaw whispered. Her gaze traveled again toward her brother, who still sat with Dawnstrike and Ferrettail. Suddenly, she feared the answer Rookshade would come up with. She tried to ignore the way her heart started to stutter again, though this time it was more painful.

"I'll admit, for a moment, I was suspicious of Mintwillow." Rookshade flicked his tail tip as his words demanded Silverpaw's full attention. "Her distance, the fact that she tried so hard to keep the identity of your father a secret—I mean, everyone knows now that he *was* a rogue, but did she even tell *you* his name?"

"No . . . ." Silverpaw thought with a frown. "No, she didn't."

"And now, with her disappearance during an attack, it's all so suspicious to me," Rookshade continued when he saw Silverpaw's reaction. "But if my father agrees with Thistlestar that it was unrelated, I guess my own suspicions are null. What about you, though?"

"M-Me?" Silverpaw asked quietly, Rookshade's sudden ranting taking her a bit by surprise.

"Who do you suspect?" he voiced his question further, his curious gaze watching Silverpaw intently.

As her gaze found her brother again, she felt beads of doubt and dread form within her. "I don't know," she admitted, forcing out a sheepish laugh. "Anyways, I'm sure the Gathering tomorrow will be interesting, don't you agree?"

Rookshade eyed her more seriously at that, the action sparking even more worry inside her. " . . . yeah, it sure will be!" he finally agreed, closing his eyes cheerfully. Silverpaw internally breathed out a sigh of relief as they started talking about less serious things, and every so often, her gaze would stray to her brother again. *He wouldn't jeopardize us like that,* she promised herself. *It's like he said*

—he's only seeking out extra training to be better, right? But if he won't listen to me about those cats from that dark forest . . . . Silverpaw held back a shudder and quickly banished the thoughts. This could be something she worried about after the next Gathering—even if she didn't get to attend, she'd make sure to ask all about it.

Chapter Fourteen

Silverpaw let out a short puff of air as she followed her Clanmates into the clearing beneath the Gathering Stones. Almost all of the other leaders sat atop them—she could pick out Wolfstar, Vinestar, and Lichenstar, though it was apparent that Buzzardstar hadn't arrived yet. Thistlestar had decided to take extra time on their journey to the Gathering, though the apprentice couldn't figure out why her uncle would do that. *Maybe he wants us to arrive last,* she thought curiously. *It* would *help him avoid casual chatter, and maybe that's for the best, since he wants all of us to stay quiet about Mintwillow.* Ever since the events of the day before, Thistlestar hadn't spoken a word to Silverpaw or her brother—whatever his true thoughts were, he made sure to keep them to himself. Regardless, both of the siblings had been permitted to attend the Gathering, and Silverpaw felt more excited than Stormpaw looked.

While her brooding brother trailed near the edges of the group, Cricketpaw stayed by Silverpaw's side as they met the other apprentices; or rather, *apprentice.* Only Lilypaw sat at the usual spot for apprentices, and Silverpaw had to hold back the worry she felt. *Don't get ahead of yourself,* she scolded herself quickly. *SwiftClan doesn't even* have *apprentices right now, and the last BlazeClan apprentices were warriors by your first Gathering!* Briefly, Silverpaw glanced over her shoulder and noticed how Ferrettail, Falconwing, and Cindertalon each found spots a bit away from the warriors of other Clans. Dovesong, however, was quick to find the molly that Silverpaw recognized as Goldenflame along with a tortoiseshell who had green eyes. Silverpaw didn't recognize her, but after a moment realized that she must be the other sister that Goldenflame had mentioned on a border patrol once; Turtlepelt.

"No Wasppaw tonight?" Lilypaw's voice broke through Silverpaw's silent observations, and she realized that they'd reached the apprentices' spot sooner than she anticipated.

"Nope, sorry, Lilypaw," Silverpaw responded quickly, instinctively taking on a bit of a teasing tone. Then, she grew apologetic and glanced back at the chattering crowds of cats. "I'm sorry for how much everyone teased you the other day—I shouldn't have called out to you like that."

"Oh, it's fine," Lilypaw gave a playful roll of her eyes. "My father always teases me and my siblings like that—even Riverpaw, who doesn't seem to be the slightest bit interested in the *romances* of life."

Silverpaw had to hold back a snort at the RushClan apprentice's words as she pointed to a dark bluish-grey molly at the medicine cats' circle. She immediately realized that it must have been Lilypaw and Webpaw's sister, Riverpaw. Even though they couldn't be more than a moon older than Silverpaw, the medicine cat apprentice seemed to exude an air of wisdom and confidence, even from so far away.

"Hey, Silverpaw?" the light brown molly spoke again, her voice carrying a sudden edge of curiosity. When Silverpaw gave a questioning hum in response, Lilypaw gave her a nudge and continued speaking in a hushed tone. "Why does your brother always look so angry?"

Silverpaw sat up straight and glanced around before noticing that Stormpaw had remained detached from the other apprentices, his expression as dark as it had been the previous day. "That's just how he looks," Silverpaw stammered out and tried to force a lighthearted laugh, though she was pretty sure it just made her sound nervous. "Don't think too much into it, Lilypaw."

When Lilypaw didn't press the question, Silverpaw decided that her words had been convincing enough, though she held back a relieved sigh. *That would just lead to a conversation I can't have with anyone right now,* she reminded herself sternly. Once more, the crowds of warriors caught her attention as she noticed the familiar pale orange fur of Sandfoot as he padded to meet a warrior from SwiftClan, just like Dovesong had. Though it wasn't just any warrior—it was Sorrelfrost, the molly that he'd been seeing. On his path to meet her, though, Sandfoot nearly tripped over his tail. Lilypaw let

out a snicker from beside Silverpaw, apparently having seen the same stumble.

"That's one of your Clanmates, isn't it?" she asked Silverpaw, her whiskers twitching in amusement. "He's so clumsy around that molly!"

Silverpaw found herself holding back laughter as she agreed. "He's a little quiet, but I've never seen him fumble like that!"

"Is this the first time you've seen him and Sorrelfrost together?" Cricketpaw chimed in, making Silverpaw jump a bit. She nearly forgot that she wasn't alone with Lilypaw. "They're so terrible!" The three apprentices let out a short bout of laughter just as the bushes on the edge of the clearing rustled. They silenced themselves as Buzzardstar entered the clearing with her own Clan on her tail. Silverpaw didn't recognize many of their warriors, but she noticed the same white tom from her first Gathering—Absent, with the scar on his face. Buzzardstar quickly climbed the Tallrock as her deputy found a spot among the lower ledges, and her medicine cats joined those of the other Clans.

"Glad to see you've made it," Silverpaw heard Thistlestar speak kindly as the chattering slowly died down. "Since you were the last to arrive, perhaps you'd like to go first, Buzzardstar?"

"That's kind of you, Thistlestar," Buzzardstar murmured with a bow of her head before she stepped forward to make announcements. "I'm happy to announce that there have been no more rogue traces within our borders—this time, it's certain. Our medicine cat apprentice also received her full name at the last half moon meeting—she now goes as Honeyberry, and is a full-fledged medicine cat!"

Though the BlazeClan announcements were short, the Clans cheered for the newest medicine cat's name. The brown-and-white tabby swiftly nodded to Lichenstar, signaling for her to announce next. The fluffy ginger-spotted tabby stepped forward a few paces, her expression as soft and friendly as ever as she gazed out over the five Clans. "Hickoryseed has had four healthy kits, and even though we're facing the start of leaf-bare, they seem like strong additions to

MistClan. We also have two new warriors to announce; Vixencloud and Sneezestorm!"

As the Clans once again erupted into celebratory calls, Silverpaw found herself rearing onto her hind paws to single out the new warriors. She easily recognized Vixencloud's ginger tabby pelt among her Clanmates, and her black-furred brother sat beside her. Their heads were raised proudly as their names were called, and Silverpaw swallowed down a surge of pride. *You only met Vixencloud once!* she swiftly reminded herself. She watched as Lichenstar turned to glance over the remaining three leaders. The MistClan leader seemed to take interest in Vinestar, who looked like she was trying to make herself appear smaller.

"Vinestar, would you like to go next?" Though Lichenstar spoke softly, her voice seemed to carry all the way across the hollow.

"U-Uhm—" Vinestar stammered as the attention of the Clans fell to her, but she quickly gave in. "Sure, thank you, Lichenstar. As you all know, a strange illness has overcome the elders of SwiftClan. Two moons ago, Palespirit passed due to the illness. Only a few sunrises ago, Snakefang passed as well. Bristlehawk shows no sign of recovering, and Goosepounce, our most recent elder, seems to have caught it, as well. There's, erm, nothing else to report for SwiftClan."

Just as Vinestar turned to face Thistlestar, movement from the medicine cats caught everyone's attention. A pale brown tabby rose to his paws, his gaze set on the five leaders as he prepared what he was about to say.

"It's practically leafbare, and this strange illness has forced me to deplete almost all of my herb collections," he mewed, distress lacing his voice. "If my fellow medicine cats have anything extra in their storages, would the leaders allow them to help me cure our elders?"

"Cypressleaf!" Vinestar hissed quietly, looking painfully uncomfortable. Beside her, Wolfstar looked almost disgusted by the sudden request, though Buzzardstar and Lichenstar remained friendly.

"We've not had a single sickness yet," Buzzardstar addressed the SwiftClan medicine cat smoothly. "If need be, my warriors are even willing to escort my medicine cats into the Twolegplace to find the more uncommon herbs."

"Same with us," Lichenstar spoke up, offering a firm nod. Below them, Silverpaw noticed two of the medicine cats voicing their agreement; one a dark tortoiseshell molly, the other an older, dark grey tabby. She also saw that a fluffy ginger molly gave the slightest of nods, but the medicine cat glanced warily up at Wolfstar as she did so.

"I'm sorry to hear of SwiftClan's suffering," Thistlestar mewed when Vinestar motioned for him to take his turn in announcements. "I'd offer to help, but some of our own elders have grown sick, as well—Vinecrawl and Warblerwing, to be exact." When Thistlestar paused, Silverpaw found herself eyeing him from her spot with the apprentices; he was clearly unsure if he should reveal the state Warblerwing was in.

Below the leaders, Wrenfeather let out a purposeful cough, and Thistlestar recovered from his momentary hesitance. "There was another rogue attack on one of our hunting patrols. All of the wounds were superficial, but what's troubling me is the fact that these rogues have passed through our territory almost entirely undetected. I've no theory as to why they'd choose to target us, but I implore you all to stay on your guard should they change their focus."

Thistlestar had hardly finished speaking when Wolfstar let out a raspy chuckle. A thick silence crept over the clearing at his behavior, and Silverpaw could see that some of the cats from the RushClan ranks looked uncomfortable. She could recognize Mudbreath easily after her trip to Starfall—along with Troutslip and Reedtuft, though the former of them was with two mollies who were strangers to Silverpaw.

"Is something funny, Wolfstar?" Her uncle's tone made her blood freeze over inside her veins. Though he still sounded kind, there was a hint of challenge to it that she rarely detected. Wolfstar, however, was unphased, his scruffy fur moving with the shrug he

offered in response.

"Those rogues seem to be quite interested in your Clan, Thistlestar," the RushClan leader responded idly. "I doubt the rest of us have anything to worry about."

"We'll keep our wits about us, don't worry," Vinestar quickly assured Thistlestar, while Buzzardstar nodded after she gave an exasperated huff.

"Yes, we'll all stay vigilant, even if Wolfstar thinks it's unnecessary," Lichenstar added. Silverpaw noticed how she sent a cool glance toward the RushClan leader all while keeping a friendly expression on her muzzle. *She's good at that,* she thought in admiration. *Maybe I could learn something from her if I come to more Gatherings.*

Before Silverpaw could get lost in her thoughts and observations again, Wolfstar stepped forward to make his announcements. "I see I chose well to leave my elders at our camp this moon," he started, his crude words surprising Silverpaw. "The rest of you are riddled with such sickness."

"Wolfstar!" a surprised gasp came from the broad-shouldered silver molly below him; his deputy.

"Oh, calm yourself, Ripplewater," Wolfstar responded smoothly with a dark glance at her. "You know I jest. Anyways, there have been no new happenings for RushClan this moon. We hope you all recover promptly from whatever has been causing your distress."

Silverpaw felt her heartbeat falter when she noticed that, as Wolfstar fell silent and motioned for his Clanmates to take a moment to chatter with everyone, Thistlestar looked like he wanted to say something. Thankfully, he seemed to think better of it and keep it to himself. *We don't need two arguments like that in only three moons!* she thought, shuddering at the idea of what it could lead to. Beside her, Lilypaw looked more uncomfortable than ever, even as idle conversations began to echo across the clearing once again.

"Are you okay?" Silverpaw asked the RushClan apprentice,

eyeing her carefully. "Wolfstar always seems to say things that the rest of you don't agree with."

"Y-Yeah, he does that a lot," Lilypaw admitted, looking towards her Clanmates. "I'm sorry if he's ever said anything to offend you or your Clanmates."

"Ah, no, it's fine," Silverpaw lowered her voice as she responded, struggling to hide a playful tone. "We just say that he's old and call it even."

Together, the two mollies erupted into hushed snickers. Silverpaw wove her relief into her laughter, glad that her words seemed to cheer up the light brown molly at her side. Suddenly, Lilypaw stopped laughing and turned away. Her gaze was fixed on the dark blue-grey cat at the medicine cats' circle, and Silverpaw had to remind herself that it was Lilypaw's sister.

"Silv, don't look now, but I think you've got an admirer," Lilypaw whispered suddenly, her voice sharp with a teasing tone. Confused, Silverpaw looked more closely at Riverpaw, but the molly didn't even acknowledge her existence.

"What are you talking about?" she asked quickly, glancing around as she felt her ears heat up with embarrassment.

"What part of *'don't look'* don't you understand?" Lilypaw snorted and knocked into Silverpaw playfully. The action enticed another burst of laughter from Silverpaw, though she remained curious as they settled down once more.

"Seriously, though, what are you talking about?" Silverpaw asked again. Her mind only drew a blank when she tried to think of who Lilypaw could be talking about.

"You don't seem like the oblivious type!" Lilypaw taunted, her yellow eyes bright with amusement when her words flustered Silverpaw yet again. Then, the light brown molly lowered her voice before saying, "Cricketpaw has been mooning over you all night! Though, I can't say I blame him; the moonlight reflecting off of your fur *does* have a bit of an entrancing effect."

"S-Shut up!" Silverpaw squeaked as she became even more flustered. She elbowed Lilypaw playfully, telling her to cut out her teasing while her thoughts went to her Clanmate. *Cricketpaw's been mooning over* me *?* she thought in astonishment. Part of her wanted to glance to her other side to see if it was true, but she knew the action would give her away.

"Hey," Lilypaw let out a laugh and returned the elbow to Silverpaw's side. "I'm only returning the favor from my patrol the other day!"

"Don't get too rowdy, apprentices," a sudden voice startled them both. Silverpaw glanced ahead of them and saw a pure-white tom walking by, and remembered he was a BlazeClan warrior named Absent. *He spoke up at my first Gathering!* she realized. *And he had that cool-looking scar!* Quickly, Silverpaw and Lilypaw obediently ducked their heads to him, though the former eyed him in search of the scar. She realized that, with how he carried himself, Absent made sure neither of the apprentices could see it.

"I hope you're not bossing my apprentice around, Absent." Cindertalon's deep voice, rife with amusement, startled Silverpaw even more than Absent's sudden appearance. Her mentor padded up to them casually, sending a glance in Silverpaw's direction before his gaze landed on the BlazeClan warrior.

"Oh, come on, Cinder," Absent teased back, his intense amber eyes shining in the moonlight. "You know I would never." Suddenly, he turned to fully face the group of apprentices. As his scar came into sight, Silverpaw found herself enthralled by the sight of it—it was jagged, crawling from his cheek to his neck and parting the fur around it.

"Silverpaw—" Cindertalon's scolding voice quickly snapped her out of her daze, but Absent interrupted him quickly.

"It's okay, Cindertalon, I can tell she doesn't mean anything by it," he reassured the dark grey tom quickly. Then, he turned his attention back to the apprentices. His gaze lingered on Silverpaw as he said, "Do you want to hear the story of my scar?"

Silverpaw felt her ears heat up in embarrassment, and she sent a hesitant glance at Cindertalon. When her mentor gave her a nod, as if to tell her it was okay now that Absent had offered, she mewed, "U-Uh, sure—only if you're okay with that, of course."

"Gather 'round, then, apprentices," Absent mewed a bit louder with a warmhearted chuckle. Silverpaw glanced around and realized that both Cricketpaw and Lilypaw had become interested in Absent. Even Stormpaw had begrudgingly started scooting closer, though Silverpaw could see the telltale twinkle of wonder in his eyes. "It's no secret that I used to be a rogue—my sister, Amberlight, as well. To be entirely truthful, most rogues actually don't care to wander into Clan territory—the Clans don't pick fights with them, so they don't see a reason to do so. There's one group, however, that gained an interest in the Clans over time. They're led by a molly who goes by the name of Sister Shade, with a large tom named Oasis working as her second-in-command. They also serve as a . . . protection service, so to speak. All those that fell into line with this group were promised protection, not only for them, but for their families as well. Since it was only Amberlight and I, life in the city —what the Clans call *Twolegplace* —was more of a struggle than it is for most."

"How come?" Lilypaw spoke up, tilting her head curiously. "Wouldn't you be perceived as less of a threat with less numbers?"

"You also come across as easier to control," Cindertalon answered the question, his amber eyes seeming distant to Silverpaw. *Is he remembering his life there?* she wondered, remembering what Rookshade had said about his mother. "It's similar to why the Clans often work together against large enemy forces."

"The bigger groups wanted to take advantage of us, but *nobody* held more influence and power than Sister Shade and her followers. Naturally, I went to her to ensure that, above all else, Amberlight would be protected." Absent paused, a look of weary regret making its way onto his muzzle.

"That's so noble," Stormpaw whispered out, his voice much closer than Silverpaw expected. She glanced at her brother and saw

that any trace of his previous ruminations had vanished. Instead, it was replaced by a look of awe.

"It was the worst mistake of my life," Absent took on a tone of warning as he shot Stormpaw a look. "Over time, they started asking me to do things I'd have never even considered. They wanted me to harm innocent cats—oftentimes cats more defenseless than Amberlight and I were. If I didn't comply, they'd threaten to hurt her instead. Eventually, I decided to leave Sister Shade's leadership. Oasis approached me and asked me to reconsider; he knew the consequences of leaving, and in the seasons that I followed them, we formed a brotherly bond. Even he couldn't stop Sister Shade's rage, nor could he go against her word. I knew this, and in the end, my decision was final."

"Her rage?" Silverpaw echoed, shuddering at the thought of a cat so horrible rising to power. *I guess we should be thankful that Wolfstar is only old and cranky,* she thought to herself.

"Yes." The scarred tom's voice grew grim, and his eyes grew dark as he recalled the memories of life as a rogue. "To desert Sister Shade is a deathwish. As soon as she heard of my choice, she asked to meet me in an alleyway where the Twolegs pile up discarded prey, old bedding, and other strange, tattered things—I thought she wanted to convince me to stay, just like Oasis had. I told Amberlight to run into Clan territory in case things went south. When I met with her, she had her closest followers at her side. Even Oasis was there, and as soon as I met his gaze, I knew what was to become of me."

The group of apprentices collectively let out gasps at the implications. So many thoughts were running through Silverpaw's head, and once again she glanced at her mentor. In his serious amber eyes was a surprising flash of remembrance, as if he, too, were familiar with the group that Absent spoke of. *Rookshade said that when his mother grew ill, some other rogues wanted to ask the Clans for help!* she reminded herself. *This group doesn't sound like the type to ask for help at all!*

"You don't have to continue, Absent," Cindertalon spoke gently and suddenly, surprising them all.

"No, it's okay," Absent reassured him once again, his expression softening despite how heavy his tone remained. "Sister Shade ordered her followers to attack me. There were only six or seven of them at the time, but they were the most brutal of all her followers. When I tried to defend myself, they threw me from a stack of crates —cold, square stones made of Twoleg materials—and onto a sharp, cold object that gave me this scar. Usually, objects like this were upright and filled with the strange tattered objects I mentioned before, but this one was all bent out of shape. I nearly lost consciousness at the impact, but I remember how they took me to a smaller river that runs through the city and threw me into it. The next thing I recall, I was waking up on the shore just outside of BlazeClan territory. Amberlight was there, trying to patch my wound up with her . . . rather *limited* knowledge of herbs. She said she ran into some Clan cats who offered her shelter, and she helped me get to their camp. And now . . . well, here we are."

While the other apprentices burst into excited chatter, Silverpaw couldn't help but become lost in thought. Even Stormpaw had forgotten about his brooding behavior and was asking Absent a flurry of curious questions, each of which the BlazeClan tom dodged easily. Suddenly, Silverpaw realized that something about what Absent said sounded familiar. *That molly he spoke of . . . Sister Shade? Why do I feel like I've heard that before?* she pondered as her gaze drifted to Cindertalon once more.

Shortly after Absent finished his story, the leaders called to their Clans and leapt down from their perch. Silverpaw stuck close by her mentor's side as they returned to their camp, eyeing him carefully for the entire trip. While she wanted to ask him if he knew the cats that Absent had spoken of, she also did *not* want to overstep any boundaries or dig into an uncomfortable past. *If he wants to share it, he will,* Silverpaw decided after several long moments. *I'm sure he doesn't want an annoying apprentice prying, anyways.*

A/N;; I write way too many Gathering scenes, but they just have this tavern-like social feel that I can't get enough of. They also tend to make it easy to sneak in short history lessons for story that gets crammed into a single book.

Chapter Fifteen

Stormpaw kept his eyes on Rookshade as his friend spoke to him about the border patrol he had just returned from. Ever since Mintwillow had vanished, Stormpaw had requested that Rookshade keep an eye open for anything out of the ordinary. Even now, countless sunrises later, there was no trace of the silver-and-white molly. *Good riddance,* he thought sourly to himself. *She can stay gone, for all I care—she was only making our lives harder.*

"That's unfortunate," was all he could muster in response, every time. Though his responses were short, Stormpaw could tell that Rookshade never could pinpoint his feelings on the subject. He often caught his friend searching his own gaze in an attempt to discover said feelings. This time, Stormpaw turned to the grey-and-white molly who sat with them; he'd keep his conflicting emotions hidden away. "Icemint, what do you think?" The medicine cat apprentice had earned her full name only a day prior, at the last half moon. Even though Thistlestar hadn't held a ceremony for her, news circulated the camp soon enough.

"I'm sure Mintwillow had her reasons," Icemint mewed tentatively. She eyed Stormpaw, worry mixed in with her usually timid expressions. "I could see that she felt bad for how she treated you and Silverpaw; maybe she felt like she didn't have a choice."

Stormpaw held back a scoff, not wanting to offend Icemint—after all, he'd been the one to ask for her input. "Yeah, maybe," the grumble was the only thing that escaped him.

"Speaking of Silverpaw," Rookshade murmured quietly, almost hesitantly, "there's something I've been meaning to talk to you about, Storm."

"What is it?" Stormpaw asked quickly, his ears perking towards the black-furred tom. If something had happened to his sister without his knowing, StarClan help whoever—

Suddenly, Rookshade let out a dramatically weary sigh, cutting through Stormpaw's darkened thoughts. "Ever since the last Gathering, she's been practically stuck at Cricketpaw's side. I don't know what happened, but she hardly speaks to me—not that she ever talked to me much to begin with, but still."

Stormpaw only stared at Rookshade, blinking a few times as he registered the words. Of course, Silverpaw had grown smitten for Cricketpaw; it was something Stormpaw saw happening from the start, even if he hadn't realized the truth of it right away. It only made sense, considering how close the two had always been.

"What do I do, Stormpaw?" Rookshade pressed, his exasperated performance ebbing away when he didn't get an answer. "*You're* the one who wanted me to keep her attention. Throw me a mouse, here." The words seemed to shock Icemint, but Stormpaw hardly noticed her reaction. Instead, he recalled the day he had requested such a thing.

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"You could get hurt, Silver," Stormpaw muttered to his sister when she spoke highly of Cricketpaw, though not at all to his surprise. Cricketpaw was nice enough, sure, but Stormpaw still felt unsure of their denmate.

"Isn't that just part of life?" Silverpaw's response, though a soft murmur, was quick; as if she was prepared to counter her brother's words. Even so, she tilted her head innocently, her blue eyes wide.

Stormpaw eyed her skeptically for a few moments, Then, rising to his paws, he said, "We should get ready for our patrol." Without waiting for a response, he padded away from his sister and toward Rookshade, Falconwing, and Icepaw. On the way there, he wondered what Wrenfeather and Thistlestar could possibly be thinking—the situation with Mintwillow, he felt, was nearly explosive at this point. Maybe nobody said anything, but he *could feel the pent-up feelings boiling over for every cat involved.*

"Hey, Stormpaw," Falconwing greeted, as friendly as he'd ever been, even with few words. Stormpaw met his amber eyes and offered a nod,

then another to Icepaw, before turning to face Rookshade.

Rookshade's amber eyes met his. The young warrior's gaze was unwavering and understanding; he, alongside Dawnstrike and Ferrettail (and now the strange molly in his dreams) were the only ones who tried to understand how he felt. And now, Rookshade understood that Stormpaw had approached only to speak to him and not his siblings. Stormpaw leaned forward, close enough so that he could whisper to Rookshade without anyone else hearing his words, and said:

"I need you to keep an eye on Silverpaw when I can't." His words were as unwavering as Rookshade's understanding. They hung in the air between them—though there wasn't much—even as he continued. "Keep her attention, however you have to." Rookshade didn't offer a word in response, only an ear-twitch of confirmation.

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"Why don't you get her something she likes?" Icemint's uncharacteristically exasperated voice brought Stormpaw out of his memories. As she let out an equally irked sigh, Stormpaw glanced at her briefly. *Something she likes?* Suddenly, something came to mind.

"She likes voles," he stated plainly, not quite sure what else to offer. "Get her one."

"That's it?" Rookshade blinked slowly at Stormpaw's words. "I don't think a *vole* is going to be enough."

"I mean, yeah, I guess. She never cared much for birds, or rabbits." Stormpaw let out a sigh that almost mimicked Icemint's previously exasperated tone. "I dunno, just improvise if it doesn't work. I trust you." Rookshade stiffened a bit and looked up at the slowly-sinking sun. To Stormpaw, it looked like he was holding back a frustrated groan.

". . . why am I doing this again?" the dark tom asked slowly, sounding genuinely annoyed for once.

Besides the fact that I told you to? "It's the best way to protect

her," Stormpaw mewed. Even though he was able to withhold his desired response, he couldn't help the frown that made its way onto his muzzle. "Especially now that we don't seem to be on speaking terms."

"Wait, what?" Icemint jolted a bit at his words. "Since when?"

"Oh yeah," Rookshade spoke more casually, letting his gaze fall back down to his sister and friend. "What even happened between you two?"

Stormpaw resisted the urge to roll his eyes, and instead he offered a shrug. "She just didn't agree with my extra training. She'll learn to accept it, though; I'm doing it for her." As he said it, Stormpaw's thoughts of his sister were suddenly overrun by those of Mintwillow. Most of his Clanmates had already moved on from what happened, the exceptions being Daisynose, Mistypool, Dovesong, and Newtsplash. Thistlestar pretended as if he weren't bothered by her disappearance, and Ferrettail acted no different, even though Stormpaw remembered seeing him with Mintwillow several times at the start of his apprenticeship.

"About that—!" Icemint spoke suddenly, her green eyes narrowing in a scolding manner. "Don't push yourself too hard, Stormpaw. You're already almost as good as Rookshade was at his *warrior* ceremony. Our Clanmates certainly seem to think so, at least."

"Thanks," Stormpaw muttered after scoffing quietly. *I'm still not good enough,* he thought bitterly, though he knew voicing it would only bring on overwhelming reassurance. He heard a soft cough echo out of the distant medicine den and his angry thoughts washed away. "Hey, how are Warblerwing and Vinecrawl doing?"

"Not good . . . ." Icemint's affectionately-scolding expression fell as she glanced toward her shared den. "We're going to be in the same spot as SwiftClan if this keeps up. Rowanspots doesn't know what's causing it, and neither does SwiftClan's medicine cat, Cypressleaf."

"We aren't gonna have to ask for herbs from the other Clans, are

we?" Stormpaw asked with a grimace as he recalled how embarrassed Vinestar looked when Cypressleaf asked for help. He didn't want the other Clans to expect something in return, either.

"Asking medicine cats for help is different than asking Clan leaders," the newly-made medicine cat responded as if she had read Stormpaw's thoughts. "We can't afford to be ravaged by sickness this early in the season—it hasn't even snowed yet!"

"She's right," Rookshade chimed in thoughtfully. "We just lost a warrior *and* we're being targeted by rogues. This is a really bad time to have such a serious epidemic."

Stormpaw nodded slowly and remembered how he saw even the RushClan medicine cat silently offer assistance to the SwiftClan medicine cat. Even when a leader is embarrassed to ask for help, or reluctant to give it, their medicine cats seemed shamelessly willing to do both. Then, as he fully registered Rookshade's words, he was reminded of the rogues. *I wonder when Dawnstrike and Ferrettail will introduce me to them,* he thought almost too casually. As always, he ignored the foreboding feeling he got when those thoughts overcame him without so much as a warning.

Just as he was about to embark on another of his meaningless internal monologues, movement caught his eyes. Daisynose was approaching Thistlestar, her cream-and-grey fur somewhat disheveled and her eyes unusually sad. Stormpaw watched as she murmured something to his uncle, who nodded in understanding and quickly climbed onto the Highroot.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather below the Highroot!" he called out as if he needed it. Most cats were already in the clearing; some were returning from patrols, some were preparing to leave for their own patrols. Others, like Stormpaw, Icemint, and Rookshade, were engrossed in quiet conversation as they relaxed in between duties. Regardless, Stormpaw remained performatively curious as he peered up at Thistlestar.

"Daisynose—" the mostly-white tom spoke, his voice warm as he watched the old molly slowly pad closer to him. "—is it your wish to give up the name and duties of a NightClan warrior, and instead

join the elders?'

"It is," Daisynose rasped softly in response.

"Very well." Thistlestar blinked slowly—reassuringly—and nodded at his aunt. "Your Clan honors you and all the service you've given to us over the moons. I call upon StarClan to give you many more moons of rest and happiness."

"Daisynose! Daisynose!" The Clans' chanting of her name startled Stormpaw, though he was quick to join in. As Daisynose bowed her head and padded to the elders' den, he wondered if Mistypool would be joining her anytime soon. His grandmother was in arguably better physical shape than her sister, but even *she* wasn't able to escape the claws of old age. When Daisynose was greeted warmly by Lynxtail and Snailbelly, Stormpaw suddenly wondered if he'd be treated so kindly when it was his turn to retire. The unusually-intrusive thought shocked him; *why* would he be worried about that when he was still only an apprentice?

Stormpaw was mentally berating himself for entertaining such thoughts when Dawnstrike approached him. He'd hardly even noticed that Icemint had left to tend to the sick elders, or that Rookshade had left to try and speak to Silverpaw. Briefly, there was a silence between himself and the cream-furred molly that *almost* invaded his personal space. While he was eyeing her, silently waiting for whatever she had to say, he realized she was visibly considering her words. It had been nearly two moons since her outburst about her feelings toward Thistlestar, and neither of them had brought it up again. The memory hung over their heads every time they trained together, neither of them willing to show just how suffocated they felt by its presence.

"Meet me at moonrise," Dawnstrike finally said, her voice curt and quiet. "At the secret entrance."

At her words, Stormpaw glanced up at the now-setting sun and realized it wouldn't be long until moonrise. By the time he returned his gaze to Dawnstrike, he was met with empty space and realized that the warrior had left as quickly as she had approached. *She can be so infuriating sometimes,* he thought suddenly, wondering what his

uncle saw in such a brash molly. Surely she wasn't always like that, though; during their nighttime training, Stormpaw *knew* he saw a liveliness in her eyes that he never saw anywhere else. In the camp, it almost seemed like she felt caged in by their Clanmates; restricted by their expectations, perhaps.

With a sigh and a shake of his head, Stormpaw decided he'd return to the apprentices' den until moonrise. He rose to his paws and padded toward it, but when he realized Wasppaw was *sulking* in his nest, he quickly backed out of the den. Briefly, Stormpaw grew tempted to ask Wasppaw what had happened, though the urge was quickly snuffed out by the realization that he didn't really care that much. *He's probably mad that he didn't get to see Lilypaw at the Gathering,* he decided with a tiny roll of his eyes.

As he entered the clearing once again, Stormpaw let his gaze travel over the camp. He could check on Warblerwing and Vinecrawl, though he was still unsure of the younger elder after what she said about Icemint becoming the next medicine cat. There was also the option of hanging near Rookshade until it was time to leave, but with how observant his friend seemed to be, he'd probably follow Stormpaw out of the camp at moonrise.

"I guess I'll just . . . sit alone over here," he grumbled to himself as he found a secluded spot in one of the corners of the camp.

Even though he expected to be bored out of his mind, moonrise came fast enough. Stormpaw made the time pass by observing his Clanmates, much like Rookshade did; he watched their actions curiously, pondering over them only briefly before turning to watch the next. Before he knew it, it was time to meet Dawnstrike.

The walls of the camp hid the moon from his sight; his only determination of the time was based off of the emptiness of the camp, and the darkened, star-covered sky. Stormpaw carefully crept to the front entrance and weaved through the secret tunnel. When he exited, he found only Dawnstrike; Ferrettail was nowhere to be seen.

"He's staying with Warblerwing," Dawnstrike whispered before Stormpaw could ask about it. "We need to be quick and quiet;

Wrenfeather put two cats on guard duty tonight, so come on."

Stormpaw frowned but kept his mouth shut as he followed Dawnstrike through the forest. They stayed concealed in the undergrowth as they snuck around the guards, and then she led him north. The path she took was different than usual, and Stormpaw was quick to realize she wasn't taking him to their usual meeting place. Before long, they were at the edges of their territory, peering into unknown land.

". . . Dawn—"

"Shut up and climb this tree," she ordered quickly with a glance over her shoulder. *That was weird,* Stormpaw thought, though he quickly obeyed and climbed the tree she motioned to. She was hot on his tail, and didn't hesitate to nudge him along a thick branch that crossed over another tree's branch a little ways away from the border.

Dawnstrike had him climb down from there, and then led him a few fox-lengths further before stopping at the edge of a clearing. Stormpaw perked his ears as he heard idle chatter coming from ahead, and sent the warrior a questioning glance.

"Just follow my lead," she hissed quietly. Suddenly, the voices silenced themselves, and the warrior winced before quickly leading Stormpaw into the clearing. Ahead of them stood four cats, three of which he quickly recognized from the attack on Silverpaw's hunting patrol. The tiny black-and white tom, a pale brown molly with uncomfortably-striking green eyes, and the brown molly with dark brownish-ginger markings. There was an unfamiliar cat, a younger, slender grey molly with the warmest green eyes Stormpaw had ever seen.

Immediately, Stormpaw grew wary of them. *She took me to meet the rogues, unannounced* and *without Ferrettail?* he thought incredulously, though a stolen glance at Dawnstrike told him nothing.

"Oh, it's only you, Dawn!" the black-and-white tom laughed after a tense moment of silence. "Where's Ferrettail at? It's not often you

show up without him—especially not with new company."

New company? Stormpaw resisted the urge to glance at Dawnstrike again. Clearly, she had brought cats to the rogues before. Just how long had they been doing this?

"We can't stay long," Dawnstrike responded hesitantly, interrupting Stormpaw's thoughts. "I only wanted to introduce Stormpaw—like I've said, he shows promise. Fer's father is still sick, so he's spending time with him; my mother is ill, as well, so our meeting will have to be short tonight."

"Well, you're always welcome here, Dawn!" the tom purred a little too affectionately. Stormpaw couldn't help how he narrowed his eyes at the rogue, who then turned to him. "And, of course, it's good to finally meet the infamous Stormpaw!"

"Infamous?" Stormpaw echoed softly, holding his gaze steadily.

"Oh, yes; Dawn here says that your *entire* Clan is rather impressed by your swift progress—"

"So?" the apprentice snapped suddenly, though he'd be lying if he said the tom's words didn't flatter him.

"—and they're equally wary of that little *attitude* of yours." Immediately, the unnamed tom's facade dropped as his eyes darkened with an intimidating, almost twisted amusement.

There was a chuckle from beside him as the pale molly padded forward. "You'll fit in just fine here," she mewed with an approving nod. "I'm Orchid, and this sleazy tom is Badger."

"I'm Ricochet," the striped molly spoke up, looking annoyed with her companions' behavior. "Don't let Badger's antics fool you—I'm the oldest of this lot, and I'm in charge when our superiors aren't around. Nyx, introduce yourself."

"Hi," the slender grey molly mewed slowly, though her soft voice was unwavering. "Obviously, I'm Nyx. It's nice to meet you, Stormpaw."

"Same to you," Stormpaw responded slowly and dared a glance at Dawnstrike. Though he was skeptical of the rogues, they seemed nice enough—well, except for Badger. Something about the friendliness between him and Dawnstrike made him feel uncomfortable, but his Clanmate acted as if it were something she'd grown used to. *Is this part of why she's so horrible to my uncle?* he thought, though he didn't dare voice what was on his mind.

"Make sure you're well-acquainted with them, Stormpaw," Dawnstrike instructed after she shared a few quiet words with Badger. "We're leaving soon, but next time we train, we'll be meeting with them again."

Stormpaw only offered a nod in response. Embarrassingly enough, once his skepticism ebbed away, he felt more awkward than anything. What was he even supposed to say? The older rogues seemed more interested in what Dawnstrike had to say. Nyx, though, stayed near Stormpaw and asked him about his life in NightClan. Every time she asked a question that he felt was too revealing, he'd find a way to dodge around it; sometimes he'd turn the question around on her, sometimes he'd ignore it entirely.

After some time, a few white specks of snow fell into his field of vision, and he started a bit. Stormpaw immediately remembered Icemint's comment about how they hadn't seen the first snow, and he felt a sense of dread bubble deep inside him. With a glance at Dawnstrike, he saw that the sight of snow had surprised her, as well.

"Dawnstrike, we should go," he whispered after padding a bit closer to her.

"You're right. Head back toward the border, cross on the branches just like before." Dawnstrike rose to her paws as Stormpaw bowed his head to the rogues in farewell. He heard her utter her own farewell, and when he glanced over his shoulder, he saw that Badger brushed his muzzle against hers affectionately.

Stormpaw held back a scoff and didn't wait for Dawnstrike to catch up as he climbed the tree and crossed over the border. He set a steady pace for himself as he padded toward the camp, though,

and before long, the warrior had caught up to him. They walked in silence together, but when they neared their camp, Stormpaw's sense of dread only increased. There was an air of horror and panic coming from the camp; he exchanged a worried glance with Dawnstrike and picked up their pace.

"Something's wrong," he hissed as they neared the secret tunnel. "What could have happened? We weren't gone that long—"

"I don't know—follow me through, but wait for me to emerge quietly before entering the camp." Dawnstrike didn't wait for his response before she started crawling through the tunnel, and Stormpaw wasn't keen on the idea of disobeying her. Quickly, they crawled toward the main entrance, and as they neared it, he heard the voices of all of his Clanmates. *There's no way we'll get in without being seen,* he fretted when he realized the predicament they were in. Ahead of him, Dawnstrike seemed to accept their fate as she entered the camp. Almost immediately, Stormpaw heard someone approach her.

"Dawnstrike?" the hiss belonged to Sandfoot, who sounded concerned rather than upset. "Where have you *been?* Warblerwing had a fit and—"

"Where is Stormpaw?" Thistlestar's furious voice interrupted Sandfoot's hushed one, and Stormpaw felt his heart drop even further than he thought was possible.

Somehow, Dawnstrike sounded calm when faced with their leader's rage. "Relax, Thistle—we were just out for some nighttime training."

"Under *whose* authority?" Thistlestar's voice growled in response. Stormpaw shuddered a bit; he hadn't heard his uncle become so angry since his first Gathering. "What were you even *thinking,* Dawnstrike? What if you had been attacked by rogues—"

"I said *relax,* Thistlestar," Dawnstrike retorted coolly. "Stormpaw, come on out."

To Stormpaw's surprise, Dawnstrike said nothing else, and

neither did Thistlestar. A heavy silence fell over them, though Stormpaw could still hear the fretting that came from the rest of their Clanmates. *What happened to Warblerwing?* he worried as he slowly emerged from the tunnel and entered the main clearing. Almost immediately, he was met with Thistlestar's withering gaze. A searing mixture of disappointment and worry swam in his usually-soft amber eyes. They both opened their mouths to speak at the same time, but Dawnstrike beat them to it.

"See? He's fine, no need to worry," she snapped, rolling her eyes as she regained her usual irritable composure. "Sandfoot, what were you saying about Warblerwing? What happened?"

Sandfoot seemed uncomfortable in the newfound tension between Dawnstrike, Thistlestar, and now Stormpaw. "He . . . he had a coughing fit, Rowanspots wasn't able to stop it and now he's not responding to anyone or anything. She thinks—"

"Oh, StarClan," Dawnstrike hissed as she cut her brother off again. "Where's Ferrettail—is he okay?" Quickly, she rushed off toward the medicine den with Sandfoot at her tail. As she left, Stormpaw caught an apologetic glance from her and held back a sigh of frustration. *Of course she'd leave me to face Thistlestar alone,* he thought as he turned to meet his uncle's harsh gaze. Behind the leader, he saw a flash of pale silver, and realized that Silverpaw was hovering nearby, her blue eyes round with worry.

"Uncle Thistlestar—" he started slowly, not sure what he was expected to say.

"Nighttime training with *Dawnstrike?"* Thistlestar interrupted him, his tone incredulous. "Stormpaw, what— what made you think this was a good idea?"

"What do you want me to say?" he grumbled in response. His words, he quickly realized, were a mistake. Anger flared in Thistlestar's eyes, and Stormpaw tensed as his uncle breathed out a deep sigh through his nostrils.

"Meet me in my den," he ordered sternly. "I'll be there soon with Wrenfeather."

Stormpaw couldn't help how he flinched when Thistlestar spun around and stalked off to find the deputy. He frowned and trudged to the leader's den, not even noticing when his sister rushed up to walk beside him for a few moments.

"I didn't tell him anything," she whispered quickly, sounding more worried than she looked—as if an unfinished argument hadn't hung over their heads ever since Mintwillow vanished. "He kept asking, but I promise, I didn't. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Stormpaw quickly assured her, trying to keep his voice from wavering. "We were just training, that's all. Don't worry, okay?" When Silverpaw finally nodded at his words, Stormpaw nudged her a bit and entered Thistlestar's den. Before long, his uncle and mentor entered the den, both of their expressions stormy with disappointment.

"I knew that you'd been taking lessons from Dawnstrike and Ferrettail, but I didn't think you were sneaking out at night for them," Wrenfeather started without hesitation. "I thought that once I started training you more, they would *stop,* actually."

"What's so wrong about getting in extra training?" Stormpaw snapped, quickly bristling due to how cornered he felt. "You've seen how fast I've progressed—I'm doing *great* thanks to them! Everyone can see it!"

"It's not how we train apprentices," Thistlestar spoke this time, eyeing Stormpaw carefully. "You train with the mentor assigned to you, and that's that. No more of this nighttime training with those two—understood?"

". . . yes, uncle Thistlestar," Stormpaw muttered reluctantly when he realized he wouldn't be able to get a word in edgewise. *It's not like they can really stop me—*

"I'll make sure there's an extra guard positioned *inside* the camp from now on," Wrenfeather spoke up, interrupting Stormpaw's thoughts. The dark grey apprentice quickly cursed himself as he held Wrenfeather's gaze, trying not to glare at him. "If you want extra training that badly, Stormpaw, then I'll make sure you get it."

"Thank you, Wrenfeather. I'd appreciate it if you could make sure the rest of the Clan doesn't panic much over Warblerwing's state; I still have a few words to share with my nephew." When Warblerwing bowed his head and retreated from the den, Stormpaw shuffled his paws anxiously.

"Uncle Thistlestar . . . ?" he started quietly, glancing up at the white-furred tom. He had been so sure that they were finished scolding him, but apparently he was wrong.

"Stormpaw," Thistlestar mewed slowly, his anger finally subsiding to make way for visible stress. The leader hesitated, as if he wasn't entirely sure what to say. Finally, he sighed and said, "Silverpaw was worried sick about you, but she refused to tell me anything she knew about your whereabouts. How much does she know about this?"

"O-Only a little bit," Stormpaw admitted slowly, frowning as guilt swept through his body. "I didn't mean to make her worry, I just—"

"Is this because of what happened with Mintwillow?" Thistlestar interrupted suddenly, his amber eyes softening. Then, he sat down, though he didn't look any less stressed. "Stormy, I tried to do everything I could—"

"Don't call me that," Stormpaw grumbled angrily and looked away. "What if it *was* because of her? You didn't see how much she hurt Silverpaw. I *have* to protect her, uncle Thistlestar. I won't let her get hurt like that again."

"Are you doing it for Silverpaw, or for yourself?" Thistlestar continued gently, tilting his head at the apprentice. "I won't try to excuse Mintwillow's actions, but I knew when she decided to leave that she *genuinely* felt like she didn't have another choice. I know it hurts, and it was wrong of her to leave you both in the dark, but it's the truth."

"Whatever," Stormpaw hissed and rose to his paws. "Can I go, now?" He hardly waited for Thistlestar's response as he left the den, only to freeze at what he saw.

Icemint and Rowanspots were gently carrying Warblerwing's lifeless body from the medicine den. They laid him down in the center of the clearing before carefully assorting various leafy herbs in his pelt. Rowanspots was quick to turn away and return to her den, but Icemint seemed to hesitate. Suddenly, she met Stormpaw's gaze, and leaving to follow her mentor seemed to happen all too easily. Stormpaw only watched her leave helplessly.

Outside the medicine den, he realized that Ferrettail sat in the dark, his green eyes glinting as he stared at his father's limp body. Stormpaw shuddered at the brown-and-white warrior's expression, and though he wanted to, he couldn't look away. *Maybe it's better to stop our training sessions,* he thought slowly as he tried to process the death of Warblerwing.

Chapter Sixteen

Stormpaw stared at the soft layer of snow that covered the camp clearing, and at the flakes that continued to float down. Two moons had passed since he had been caught with Dawnstrike—two moons since Warblerwing's death—and they were the most miserable two moons of his *life*. Wrenfeather kept one eye on him at all times, so he could hardly even interact with Dawnstrike and Ferrettail without receiving some scolding words from his mentor. Every night, a second warrior had been positioned just inside the camp entrance; Stormpaw knew it was because of him, though he couldn't bring himself to feel guilty for it. *It's almost like they knew I was meeting the rogues,* he thought to himself.

Despite his thoughts, Stormpaw was certain that nobody knew about why they had been out—with the obvious exceptions of Dawnstrike, Ferrettail, and perhaps Silverpaw. Just as Stormpaw couldn't interact much with the warriors who had trained him, they kept their interactions with him curt and short-lived. Vinecrawl had miraculously recovered from her illness, and now Dawnstrike seemed to spend more time with her elderly mother; meanwhile, Ferrettail hardly spoke a word to any cat aside from Dawnstrike. Occasionally, he'd hold a short conversation with Wrenfeather. Stormpaw never knew what was said, though, and he suspected it was about him. The thought made his fur crawl uncomfortably.

Rookshade and Icemint had noticed the attention that had been placed on Stormpaw, and the former certainly didn't let him suffer without light-hearted comments. He assumed it was done in an attempt to cheer him up, but even now as they sat together, waiting for Cricketpaw and Wasppaw to finish their warrior assessments, Stormpaw found himself frustrated with his friend.

"Wrenfeather has really been watching you today," Rookshade commented, not looking up from the skinny, half-eaten mouse at his paws. "If I didn't know better, I'd assume you got into another fight with Wasppaw."

Stormpaw immediately let out a mildly annoyed groan, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. "Rook, go talk to Silverpaw or something. I really don't need to hear those kinds of things right now."

"Okay, okay," Rookshade snorted and stood, though he clearly wasn't bothered by the apprentice's attitude. "You're so moody all the time. At least Silv provides some good conversation." He wasn't wrong; while Stormpaw had only grown more fickle, Silverpaw had finally started warming up to Rookshade. For some reason, though, the black-furred tom's words only added to Stormpaw's aggravation, and he found himself nearly hunching over in an attempt at suppressing his emotions. Suddenly, Icemint let out a gentle laugh, and he snapped his head up to face her.

"What?" he questioned, eyeing her carefully. "What's so funny?"

"You're just so easily provoked," she let out another soft giggle. Then, she averted her gaze and said, "But, I mean, it's in a cute-sort-of-way."

"H-Huh?" Stormpaw reeled back, the molly's words taking him by surprise. He found himself stumbling over words immediately, struggling for a few moments before finally settling on, "You're crazy."

"See? That's exactly what I mean!" Icemint erupted into a fit of laughter when she realized just how flustered Stormpaw had become. He felt his ears burning up in embarrassment when she kept laughing.

"Ugh, whatever, just—" Stormpaw bristled and glared self-consciously at the snow that piled at his paws. "Cut it out, okay?" Over the passing moons, Icemint had become less timid around Stormpaw—even less meek than she was with her brothers, or their father. Still, Stormpaw wasn't used to the warm, bubbly feeling he got when they were together.

"Alright, fine," Icemint murmured as her laughter subsided. "It's good to see you relax every once in a while, you know. Rookshade might joke about it a bit, but Wrenfeather really has kept a close eye on you ever since that night." Both of the cats cringed a bit

when she mentioned the night of Warblerwing's death; the curly-furred tom had been admired by many in the Clan, and most cats were still mourning in their own ways.

"Tell me about it," the apprentice finally grunted, looking back up from the ground. "I can't catch a break with him!"

Wrenfeather hadn't been lying when he promised to give Stormpaw the extra training he was so desperately seeking. Whenever he wasn't supervising the apprentice's whereabouts within the camp, he was pushing him harder at the training clearing. Stormpaw thought his muscles would never stop being sore; even the molly in his dreams had noticed and taken their training a bit easier, though she pressured him to meet with the rogues again.

Stormpaw glanced in the direction of the deputy and saw that he and his sister, Dovesong, were deep in conversation. Cricketpaw sat a few tail-lengths away, his amber eyes round with excitement. *When did he even get back from his assessment?* Stormpaw wondered, though he quickly banished his thoughts when he saw that Wrenfeather was still glancing toward him every so often.

"Come *on!"* he muttered angrily before letting out a sigh of frustration. "It's been two whole moons! Can't he ease up a bit?"

"He just wants to make sure you're safe, Storm—I know *I* worry about the random cuts and scrapes you sometimes get," Icemint mewed gently. Stormpaw glanced at her, and saw that her green eyes were drifting over his pelt cautiously. *Does she know that I lie about being so clumsy?* he thought, trying to hide the shock that coursed through him. With her next words, however, his worries vanished. "What if the rogues had attacked you that night? They've become even more brazen when trespassing on our territory!"

"They didn't attack me, though," he mumbled hesitantly. *They wouldn't have—not with Dawnstrike at my side.*

"But they could have," Icemint pressed worriedly. Instead of voicing his thoughts, Stormpaw only grumbled a few incoherent words in response. After all, he decided, it was only fair, wasn't it?

When he thought about it, he realized that Dawnstrike and Ferrettail were under equally close surveillance. He could see Dawnstrike's frustration as plain as day, though Ferrettail, as quiet as he had become, acted as if he didn't notice it.

With another glance at Wrenfeather, Stormpaw realized that the only reason he had so much time to spend with his Clanmates today was because of the older apprentices' assessments. He rarely had the time for extended conversations with Icemint and Rookshade, even though the deputy seemed much more placated when Stormpaw was in their presence rather than Dawnstrike or Ferrettail.

Suddenly, Wasppaw trotted through the camp entrance with Mistypool close behind him; it nearly felt like Stormpaw had willed it into happening. His grandmother looked weary as she followed the golden apprentice, her usually attentive green eyes now dull as her sides heaved from her deep breaths. Stormpaw watched as the two cats padded toward Wrenfeather, the younger breaking away to meet his brother while Mistypool spoke with the deputy. It didn't take long for the golden-brown tom's eyes to brighten with pride, the display more than enough to tell Stormpaw that they had both passed their assessments.

Shortly after, the deputy trotted to Thistlestar's den and vanished inside. Beside Stormpaw, Icemint let out a short, light-hearted sigh. For the first time, he realized how their breath billowed out in front of them before vanishing into the cold leafbare air.

"It looks like the apprentices' den will be down to you and Silverpaw," the grey-and-white molly commented, her eyes on the two older apprentices. "I wouldn't be surprised if Falconwing starts to complain about how cramped the warriors' den becomes, though."

"There *are* a lot of warriors right now, isn't there?" Stormpaw mumbled in response; he'd only seen the inside of the warriors' den a few times, but he knew that there wasn't *that* much room for nests. "Do you think we'll have to expand it?"

"It'll probably be necessary after leafbare," Icemint mewed

thoughtfully, her green eyes trailing toward her brothers' den. "Maybe it's good that it's a bit cramped right now, though. It gets pretty cold during the night when there's more space around you."

Stormpaw gave a nod, agreeing with her. Before he could respond further, though, Thistlestar emerged from his den with Wrenfeather at his side. The leader quickly climbed onto the Highroot, his expression much brighter than the last few times he had made an announcement.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather before me!" His voice rang across the thin air freely. Stormpaw slowly inched closer to his uncle's perch, noticing how Icemint moved to stay by his side. The clearing quickly filled with curious and excited eyes; like Stormpaw, they all seemed to realize how much more cheerful Thistlestar sounded this time.

"Today, we welcome two new warriors into our ranks," the white-furred tom spoke when the crowd had settled. He paused, visibly noting that Cricketpaw and Wasppaw were already below him, then continued speaking. "I, Thistlestar, leader of NightClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these apprentices. They've trained hard to understand the code we uphold, and I commend them each to you as a warrior in their turn. Wasppaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to defend and protect your Clanmates, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do, Thistlestar!" Wasppaw responded, his voice as clear as the leader's. Stormpaw tilted his head and noticed how still the deputy's son was, even though his green eyes twinkled with excitement.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Wasppaw, from this moment on, you'll be known as Waspcatcher. StarClan honors your independence and honesty, and we welcome you as a full warrior of NightClan."

Thistlestar stopped speaking and, just like he did during the ceremony for Rookshade and Falconwing, lifted his muzzle toward the cold leafbare sky. Waspcatcher quickly followed his lead, slowly closing his eyes as he did so. All around Stormpaw, their Clanmates erupted into brief cheers. He stayed silent, though—it made more

sense to save his cheers for the end of the ceremony. It wasn't long before his uncle turned to face Cricketpaw, whose excitement was much more visible than his brother's.

"Cricketpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to defend and protect your Clanmates, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do!" Cricketpaw's voice was nearly a shout as he responded, and even though a few chuckles rippled through the crowd, the brown tabby kept his head proudly lifted.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I grant you your warrior name. Cricketpaw, from this moment onward, you'll be known as Cricketfern. StarClan honors your kindness and compassion, and we welcome you as a full member of the Clan."

"Waspcatcher! Cricketfern!" Immediately, the clearing erupted into near-deafening cheers for the new warriors. Stormpaw finally decided to let his voice chime with his Clanmates, though one voice seemed to sound above the others. He glanced across the clearing and noticed Silverpaw with Rookshade, her blue eyes sparking with pride and happiness as she called out her friends' names. Stormpaw groaned internally at the sight; even though Rookshade had finally caught her attention, she still seemed far too focused on Cricketfern.

"I have one final announcement to make," Thistlestar's voice surprised Stormpaw when the cheers died down. His uncle gazed down into the crowd, and when Stormpaw followed it, he realized he was staring at Mistypool. "It's come to my attention that Mistypool wishes to retire to the elders' den—is this true, Mistypool?"

"Yes, my son," the older molly responded with a surprising warmth to her tone, her words disregarding the formality he tried to assume. "It's time."

"Very well." Though Thistlestar's words sounded regretful, Stormpaw could see the relief written on his face as plain as day. "Your Clan honors you, and all the service you've given us. I call upon StarClan to give you many well-deserved moons of rest."

"Mistypool!" The Clan cheered as the dark grey molly padded to join the elders outside of their den. Daisynose greeted her sister happily, as did the rest of the elders. The crowd quickly started to dissipate, though many cats remained grouped to chatter at the edges of the clearing.

Stormpaw noticed how Silverpaw broke away from Rookshade and started approaching Cricketfern. He swiftly shot Icemint an apologetic glance before rushing to intercept his sister, almost forgetting the fact that they had hardly spoken in over two moons. The look Silverpaw gave him was enough to remind him of it—a guarded, almost wary expression rested on her muzzle, and her usually expressive blue eyes revealed nothing.

"Stormpaw?" she asked, her tone almost *too* light. "Have you come to congratulate them, too?" As she spoke, the silver-point molly flicked her fluffy tail in the direction of the new warriors, who were currently being smothered by the affections of Newtsplash.

Resisting the urge to cringe at the sight, Stormpaw shook his head. "I- I mean, I'm happy for them, but I wanted to talk to you."

"Did you finally decide to quit your dream-tra—"

"N-No, hush!" Stormpaw's eyes widened as he quickly tried to quiet his sister. *Maybe this was a bad idea,* he thought, glancing at where Wrenfeather sat with his family only a few tail-lengths away. *I'd* never *be able to explain that to him.* "Look, don't ever bring that up when others are so near, okay? I just wanted to talk to you about Cricketfern."

"What about him?" Silverpaw's expression quickly turned into a frown as she glanced toward the brown tabby tom briefly. The gaze she pulled back to her brother was almost painfully inquisitive.

"I just think you should be careful how close you get, you know?" Stormpaw looked away when he felt his fur burn under his sister's gaze. "N-Now that he's a warrior, I mean. He'll probably get distracted by . . . by the extra responsibility of it, yeah?"

Silverpaw narrowed her eyes at him, and Stormpaw felt his pelt prickle at her response. "Weren't you always trying to get me to talk to Rookshade, though?" she queried suspiciously before sending another glance at Cricketfern. *"He* sure doesn't seem distracted by the warriors' duties, why should it be any different for Cricketfern?"

"*Well,* Rookshade always seems to have, ah—" Stormpaw hesitated as he tried to think of a reason for his words. *This was a* horrible *idea,* he scolded himself again as he stumbled over his voice. *This is almost embarrassing at this point.* "—he . . . has more free time than most warriors, you know! He always works through his duties quickly, and he's always willing to be there for his Clanmates."

Stormpaw had never been more eager to stop talking. He resisted the painful urge to let out a sheepish sigh and slowly turned to meet his sister's gaze. While he was ready to meet a guarded or even withering expression once more, he was only met with an unusually distant gaze. The dark grey tom quickly wondered if he had said something wrong when he realized how strained Silverpaw looked—as if she were suddenly remembering something that shook her deeply.

"Uh, S-Silver, are you okay?" he asked warily, leaning a bit closer out of concern.

"Huh?" Silverpaw mumbled, blinking as she seemed to ground herself again. "I'm okay, I was just thinking about something. Sorry, Stormpaw—I didn't mean to worry you."

"No, maybe I shouldn't have—" Stormpaw tried to apologize, only to sit back in shock when Silverpaw cut him off.

"You actually might have a point," she mewed softly, her gaze suddenly trailing to the layer of snow on the earth. "D'you really think Rookshade would be better for me?"

"Y-Yeah, kinda," Stormpaw was the one mumbling this time as he tried to figure out what had just clicked inside of Silverpaw's mind. "I mean, obviously I don't control your life, I just worry—"

"I get it." Just like that, Silverpaw's cheerful facade had reclaimed its place on her muzzle. "Thanks, Stormpaw." The tom found himself only nodding in response, his mind whirling more with each passing moment.

"Silv, hey!" Cricketfern's voice sent a claw of shame through Stormpaw, who winced and tried to act casual. "I heard you cheering after the ceremony—just think, you'll be joining us soon enough, and then I can cheer above the crowd for you, too!"

Silverpaw awkwardly mumbled something in response, then dipped her head to Cricketfern and rushed off—apparently to speak with her mentor. Stormpaw felt a twinge of guilt as he watched, and the sensation only increased when he noticed Cricketfern's crestfallen face. The brown tabby watched her go before turning and padding toward Waspcatcher, his tail drooping slightly.

"Stormpaw, what in the name of StarClan was that?" Icemint's voice made him nearly leap out of his fur; he had totally forgotten about how he practically abandoned the molly to try and steer his sister's attention back toward Rookshade. "I've never seen Silverpaw look so dejected—or Cricketfern!"

The apprentice opened his mouth to respond, but no words came out. His mind couldn't seem to wrap around the destruction he seemed to have caused. *I don't think I should have done that.* Even his own thoughts came slowly, as if he wasn't even sure what to think for once. Suddenly, he felt eyes burning into his pelt, and he hesitantly turned his head to look for the source of the feeling. Stormpaw didn't expect to meet Rookshade's gaze; even more surprising was the scowl the tom sent in his direction. The unusual sight sent a shudder down Stormpaw's spine and he quickly tore his gaze away from his friend.

I definitely should not *have done that.*

Chapter Seventeen

Silverpaw let out a sigh of exhaustion as she padded into the camp behind Cindertalon. He had just finished training her for the entire first half of the day, and he hardly gave her a moment to recover in between lessons. He was gracious enough to give her some time to relax at sunhigh, though, and she was beyond ready to just sit alone with her thoughts for a while.

"Hey, Silverpaw?" When Waspcatcher hesitantly approached her, it took all of her willpower to hide her displeasure with his sudden presence. Initially, she had only hoped for peace and quiet. Now, the warrior's voice reminded her that she had practically avoided Cricketfern ever since their warrior ceremony over a moon ago.

"What is it, Waspcatcher?" she asked quietly, doing her best to remain friendly toward the golden-brown tom. *He's done nothing wrong,* she reminded herself coolly. *Neither of them have.*

"Are you okay?" The question came as a shock to the silver-point molly, though she quickly brushed it off.

"Yeah, of course," Silverpaw mewed, keeping her tone cheerful and light. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"I mean, Cricketfern said you haven't talked to him much since our ceremony." As he spoke, Waspcatcher glanced across the clearing at his brother. Silverpaw eyed him carefully while his gaze was elsewhere; he was the last cat she expected to show this kind of attention to the relationships of others, and the topic made her uneasy.

"I'm fine," she repeated her answer, her tone hardening for a fraction of a moment. "Really, Wasp, don't worry."

"Are you sure?" Waspcatcher asked and turned back to her. He caught her gaze, and Silverpaw found her pelt prickling at the sudden seriousness of his stare.

Suddenly, she perked her ears and looked around, pretending to have heard something. "Oh, sorry, I think I heard Cindertalon calling me! I'll see you later, Waspcatcher!"

Silverpaw didn't give the tom a chance to respond as she ran toward where she last saw her mentor. Once there was a reasonable distance between herself and Waspcatcher, she let out a relieved sigh and slowed her pace. On top of the distance that had formed between herself and Cricketfern, Silverpaw had felt strangely disconnected from nearly everyone over the course of the past moon. Stormpaw's words after the ceremony reminded her of how Rookshade insisted that she deserved to be treated better than she had been, and for some reason, she started second guessing all of her choices. Silverpaw immediately grew terrified of the idea that she could turn out like Mintwillow—stuck with broken relationships, living in fear of what others thought or what they could do. *She was scared enough to leave without telling anyone,* she reminded herself, feeling unusually grim. The thoughts hung over her head constantly, bringing with them a sense of existential dread that she couldn't seem to escape.

"Silverpaw." Cindertalon's formal greeting broke through her thoughts, and she started a bit as she looked at her mentor. "I was just coming to get you."

"E-Eh?" Silverpaw squeaked in surprise and tilted her head. "But we just got back from training—I thought we were finished for a little while."

"Actually, after our session today, Wrenfeather approached me," Cindertalon mewed slowly, holding Silverpaw's gaze steadily. "We think it's time for your final assessment."

"W-What?!" Silverpaw didn't even care about how her tone rose into an almost-shrill noise. "N-No, I think you're mistaken, Cindertalon. Surely we still have some more training—"

"Silverpaw, your sixth moon of training has just passed," the tom reminded her gently. "You and Stormpaw have both excelled a bit compared to most apprentices, even if your skill as a hunter doesn't flourish so much. We think you're ready."

Silverpaw felt her blood freeze up as she tried to hold her mentor's gaze. "I disagree," she blurted out suddenly, shaking her head. "I need more training, really—!"

"Is this about the troubles you've had with hunting?" Cindertalon's tone softened, and he tilted his head a bit. "Silverpaw, you know we're going to be a bit more lax for the hunting portion, right? It's nearly the middle of leafbare, so there's hardly much to catch in the first place."

"I don't know . . . ." Silverpaw tore her gaze from her mentor's and looked down at her paws. *How could they think I'm ready for this?* she fretted to herself.

"Hey," Cindertalon continued, but this time his tone hardened. "You've got this, Silverpaw. You know the code, you know your stealth and combat tactics—you're going to do just fine. Look, Wrenfeather and Stormpaw are already waiting by the front tunnel."

Reluctantly, Silverpaw gave in, despite how much she anticipated her own failure. Her breath was tight in her lungs, and even though the chilly leafbare air *certainly* contributed to that feeling, she knew she'd mostly brought it upon herself. She almost felt dazed as Cindertalon took her away from Stormpaw and Wrenfeather, and then sent her into their snow-covered territory on her own.

"I'll be watching in secret," he promised her, though he sat calmly in the snow. "Go on, and do your best. If you run into Stormpaw, you'll have to spar with him to prove you understand our battle techniques."

Silverpaw only offered a nod as she crept away from Cindertalon and into the forest. Her gratitude was immeasurable when the feeling of his eyes on her vanished, and she finally felt her panic start ebbing away. *Maybe I'll get lucky and see a few unsuspecting birds,* she mused in an attempt to calm herself. *Or maybe a rabbit—no, that would be too lucky. Birds are safe to wish for.*

Her thoughts continued as Silverpaw crept through the forest,

though she didn't pick up traces of any kind of prey. Just as she was about to give up and declare her failure to her mentor, she heard a twig snap and hid behind a thicket that still had some dead leaves clinging to it. *Stormpaw, I hope you're ready for this,* she thought. Slowly, she peeked around the thicket and nearled reeled in surprise when she saw two *huge* cats padding through the snow ahead of her. One, a molly, was dark grey with fur so long that it brushed against the snow whenever she moved. The other was a greyish seal-point tabby tom; his pelt was just as thick as the other cat's, though the fur didn't droop in the same manner.

Neither of the cats said anything, but if Silverpaw could judge by their movements, they were searching for something. The molly hardly moved while the tom would walk a few paces away to search through the snow, or inspect a few tree trunks. The behavior continued as they slowly crept through NightClan territory, unaware of Silverpaw's presence.

Suddenly, the seal-point tom let out a short breath of exasperation. "We can't rest until I find what I've lost." Despite the slight edge of irritation to his tone, his thick-furred tail bobbed lazily behind him and his ears stayed perked.

"They might be long gone by now, O. It's been moons since the last report," the grey molly mewed steadily, hardly twitching to look at him.

"I still don't understand. Things were good," he grumbled a bit, flicking his fluffy-furred tail in time with his words. "We could have had the world together, you know."

"We can't expect everyone to understand." This time, the big molly almost sounded sympathetic as she addressed her companion. "I suppose I'm partially to blame—ever since that tom escaped judgement seasons ago, others have begun doubting us."

"Shade—" The name immediately struck a chord within Silverpaw. When it was uttered, she was halfway through a step, and upon hearing it, she forgot to tread lightly through the delicate snow. When the fluffy white layer gave a noisy *crunch* in response to her pawstep, she froze—as did the two cats ahead of her.

"Who's there?" the molly called, her voice sending an icicle of fear through Silverpaw. "Show yourself."

The apprentice hardly registered that they were still in NightClan territory as she stepped out of the snow-covered undergrowth slowly. Even though *they* were trespassing on Clan territory, Silverpaw almost felt like she had to submit to them. Now that Silverpaw faced them, she realized the two strangers were even larger than she had first thought. *StarClan, they would squash me!* She could feel her panic growing again as her movements froze up. *Cindertalon must be watching, right? He'll step in soon to help! Wait—no, he'd surely get reinforcements first.*

"My, my," the grey-furred molly murmured, sounding much more amused than before. "What do we have here?" She sent a knowing glance at the tom beside her, whose expression hardened when he saw Silverpaw.

"You're—" he started hesitantly, narrowing his blue eyes in what looked like suspicion. Then, the look was gone, and he appeared much more lighthearted—almost approachable, if the circumstances had been different. "You must be one of the nearby Clans' apprentices. No longer kit-sized—not even close, yet you still have that telltale youthful look to your eyes."

Silverpaw only stared at them both, still frozen in her spot. She had no idea what she was supposed to say, or if she was supposed to respond at all, to their observations of her. For a moment, she wondered if she should have fled the moment she gave away her position. *No, I could have led them back to the camp if I did that,* she told herself sternly. *It's better to only risk myself, in case they're with the rogues who have been attacking us.* While her mind ran rampant in an attempt to concoct a plan, Silverpaw continued to examine the rogues in front of her. She quickly realized that, even though the grey molly—*Shade?*—looked thoroughly entertained, her companion almost seemed surprised beneath his friendly facade. *They weren't expecting to see me; maybe they aren't used to being snuck up on.*

"How adorable," the molly murmured again, her amber eyes finding their way back to Silverpaw. "She's shy, Oasis. Say, what's

your name?"

Just like that, Silverpaw felt her panic *skyrocket.* At first, she had been skeptical of who these cats were, but now she was certain—they were the horrible cats mentioned by Absent; they were the ones responsible for his scar, and the suffering of countless cats at the Twolegplace. *Forget squashing, they could kill me right here and now!* Just as her panic neared its peak, Silverpaw realized how crucial it was that she compose herself. If she could stay calm, maybe use her wits, she could turn the situation around and come out on top. All thoughts of her assessment had vanished with her new, singular goal; she had to get out of there unscathed and without putting her Clanmates in danger.

"Aren't young Clan cats normally accompanied by their superiors?" the tom spoke up this time, still eyeing Silverpaw, though he bore an even friendlier expression than before. In the time she had taken to compose herself, he seemed to recover from the shock of an apprentice sneaking up on them. "Why are you alone?"

"I'm not," Silverpaw countered quickly, making herself hold their gazes this time. "My patrol is nearby—I could call them over with a single yowl if I wanted to."

"Why don't you do that, then?" Shade spoke slowly. Silverpaw could almost hear the smirk that threatened to show at the edges of her expression. "Surely they would have come to retrieve you by now."

"If that's how you feel, why haven't you attacked me?" Even though Silverpaw infused confidence into her words, she could feel her unease threatening to spill over. "If you truly thought I was alone, you'd have made a move by now."

"Darling, we don't attack kits," Shade suddenly let out a snort of laughter and shook out her pelt. "Do you really think rogues like us would have such low standards for ourselves?"

"What if that *kit* attacked you first?" Silverpaw narrowed her eyes a bit and, instead of dropping into a fighting stance, she stood

a bit taller. "Here in the Clans, we defend our territory with our lives, and from where I'm standing, you're both trespassing on our land. You need to leave."

"Oh?" the large molly mimicked Silverpaw's posture, though her tone was thick with amusement. "Is that a challenge?"

"Shade, stop screwing around. Let's get moving," Oasis muttered suddenly, turning to lead her away. A twig snapped somewhere behind Silverpaw, and she quickly crouched into a fighting stance in an attempt to hide the noise. The large tom didn't even spare a glance over his shoulder as he said, "Don't even try it." *He can't think I'm that stupid,* Silverpaw scoffed mentally and glared at the tom's back. She knew when the odds were stacked against her, but if her Clanmates were nearby, she needed to hide their presence.

"Sure, I was getting restless, anyways," Shade purred as she followed Oasis away from Silverpaw. "You know we won't find a trace, but . . . ah, I suppose it can't be helped."

"If you come back, you'll have my entire Clan to answer to!" Silverpaw threatened as she rose up from her fighting stance.

The large molly threw Silverpaw a knowing glance over her shoulder before saying, "Keep telling yourself that."

Silverpaw shuddered and watched them leave with her ears perked. *Cindertalon would have arrived with reinforcements by now if he was getting them,* she told herself while she listened to the fading pawsteps. *Maybe it was safer for me to face them alone, if they truly don't attack apprentices.* Once she was certain they were beyond earshot, she let out a relieved sigh and turned around.

"Stormpaw," she called, her tone harsher than she had intended it to be, "don't you think you could have been a bit quieter?"

Immediately, Stormpaw emerged from his cover, though he looked unusually guarded. Instead of meeting Silverpaw's criticizing gaze, his jade-colored eyes were fixated on the spot where the rogues had stood only moments before. Silverpaw narrowed her eyes a bit, trying to read his emotions to no avail. *Did he see*

something else while I was caught up with them?

"We should follow them," he suggested suddenly, sounding annoyed by the entire situation. "We need to make sure they left the territory. It's only right, considering they interrupted our assessments like that."

Silverpaw eyed him again before looking toward the rogues' trail. "Okay, fine. Stay out of sight, and run if I tell you to. We need to be ready to fetch help." *And you need to get better at hiding,* she added silently. Some part of her felt like he hadn't voiced the true reason he wanted to follow them, but she let it be. *Just like Cindertalon would have intervened if he thought it was necessary, Stormpaw would have spoken his mind.*

"Don't give me that," the dark grey tom snapped as he started following the snow-tail the cats had left. "If anyone's going to be fetching help, it'll be you."

"Why, so you can act all brave for a few extra points?" Silverpaw spoke before she realized what was happening. When she noticed Stormpaw tense at her words, she rolled her eyes and decided to go with it. "We both know you're the faster of the two of us, Storm. Besides, I've already shown that I can hold my ground against them without unnecessary bloodshed."

Stormpaw's only response was a grunt and a shake of his head as they followed the pawprints left in the snow. Once she could hear the faint sound of snow crunching and creaking beneath the rogues' paws, Silverpaw broke away from her brother and crept closer. This time, the two large cats apparently knew better than to speak aloud. Silverpaw could hardly blame them; she'd be wary, too, after finding out someone was eavesdropping on her.

Soon enough, the rogues crossed the border into unclaimed territory, though they seemed to hover nearby for a short while afterwards. Silverpaw silently crept away from the border and made her way to Stormpaw, who had kept more than enough distance when tailing the trespassers.

"Should we finish our tests, now?" he asked almost as soon as

they met. "Wrenfeather told me we were to spar if we met each other, so . . . ." Silverpaw held back a frown when she noticed the uncertainty in her brother's voice. Even if they had grown painfully distant in such a short amount of time, she wanted to find a way to reassure him. Before she could muster a response, the bushes behind them rustled and both Wrenfeather and Cindertalon swiftly emerged.

"Actually, we've seen enough," the deputy spoke slowly, as if he were considering his words. Silverpaw bristled at his voice; even though she had assumed that Cindertalon had watched over her, she still felt embarrassed.

"You did good," Cindertalon added, seeming to pick up on Silverpaw's emotions. "We should return to camp—Thistlestar will need to hear about this."

Though they fell into step easily, Stormpaw pouted noticeably. "How come neither of you came to help? I thought those rogues were supposed to be dangerous."

"They are," Cindertalon responded, his tone suddenly grim. "If a grown warrior had intervened, they would have made a move to attack."

Silverpaw caught sight of a skeptical glance her brother sent at the warrior, but much to her relief he didn't say anything else. Ahead of them, she noticed how her mentor looked more uneasy than she was used to seeing him. After hastening her pace, she glanced over at him, hardly noticing how she no longer needed to crane her head to meet his gaze.

"Cindertalon?" Silverpaw started slowly, still unsure if she wanted to utter the question that danced at the edge of her tongue. When she caught his eye, however, she looked away and pushed herself to speak. "Did you know those rogues?"

". . . Yes," Cindertalon responded after a moment. "Do you remember the story Absent told you a few moons ago?"

"Yeah—I figured out who they were soon enough," Silverpaw

spoke more confidently once she realized the warrior was okay with the topic. "One was Oasis, and the other was . . . Shade, right?"

"She prefers that most call her *Sister* Shade, but yes." Cindertalon seemed to hesitate on the words he wanted to speak, and Silverpaw threw him another questioning glance. A few awkward moments passed over the four cats before he finally added, "You both handled the situation well."

"Y-You think so?" While the sudden praise flustered Silverpaw, she could still notice how it was offered to drive the conversation away from the rogues.

Maybe he wasn't as comfortable with the subject as I thought, she mused, feeling a bit guilty as they returned to the camp in silence. Their forms carved a path through the snow as they moved back to their home, though none of them seemed to care now that the rogues had left. *We wouldn't be able to hide our trail much anyways, would we?* Silverpaw realized when she glanced at the snow behind them. The thought of the rogues finding their camp made her shudder—from the way Cindertalon and Absent spoke of them, they sounded truly dangerous.

Before Silverpaw could continue pondering over it, though, she noticed that they had arrived at the camp. Once inside, their mentors both approached Thistlestar without another word to them. Silverpaw quickly exchanged a worried glance with her brother when she felt doubt bloom inside of her. *Neither of us caught anything, and we didn't even get to spar because they interrupted!* she thought anxiously. *What if they extend our training like I suggested earlier? StarClan, that would be so embarrassing!*

It wasn't long, though, before she saw Thistlestar's form nearly bursting with pride as he leaped up the stones that formed his den, and then onto the Highroot. Briefly, she caught his amber gaze—a gaze full of warmth and encouragement.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather below me!" her uncle called after meeting her gaze. Once the Clan had crowded before him, the tom looked down on Silverpaw and Stormpaw and continued. "Today is a proud day for NightClan—

perhaps the proudest day I've lived to see so far. Not only did they pass their assessments, but these two apprentices were faced with the rogues who have been terrorizing our patrols and came out unscathed. Silverpaw and Stormpaw, step forward."

Slowly, Silverpaw took several trembling steps toward her uncle. Stormpaw took a few confident strides, hardly glancing back as his sister struggled with her burst of anticipation. Even though it was clear now that they had earned their warrior names—or at least, the older cats thought as much—Silverpaw's heart only beat harder against her ribcage. She blinked hard a few times, screwing her eyes shut each time, and then sent a cautious glance around the clearing. The action was a mistake, as she quickly realized that her Clanmates eyes were on her and Stormpaw. There wasn't a single, piercing gaze that she was free from, but when she suddenly met Cindertalon's encouraging amber stare, she found she felt a bit better. Beside her mentor was Rookshade, who looked just as reassuring and encouraging as his father. With a hard gulp of air, Silverpaw turned to face her uncle again, who looked more cheerful than ever.

"I, Thistlestar, leader of NightClan, call upon our warrior ancestors to look down on these young cats. They've trained harder than most to understand the code we uphold, and I commend them each to you as a warrior in their turn. Stormpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to defend and protect your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do!" Stormpaw called out beside Silverpaw, his voice echoing around the camp.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. From this moment on, you'll be known as Stormrunner. The ancestors honor your resilience and independence, and I'm honored to welcome you as a full warrior of NightClan."

Thistlestar raised his muzzle to face the frigid leafbare sun as their Clanmates briefly cheered for the dark grey tom. When Stormpaw mimicked him, Silverpaw noticed how still he moved. She caught sight of his jade eyes just before they shut and realized that there wasn't the slightest hint of excitement or anticipation in

his gaze; there was only a steely coldness that Silverpaw couldn't recognize. She held back a shudder at the sight and turned to face her uncle once the cheers ceased.

"Silverpaw," he called warmly, "do you also promise to uphold our code and to defend and protect the Clan, even if it costs you your life?"

"I- I do," Silverpaw stammered quickly, her ears burning with embarrassment when her voice faltered. She heard a few stifled chuckles from her Clanmates and her pelt heated up even more.

Thistlestar only displayed the tiniest amount of amusement as he continued speaking. "Then by the powers of StarClan, I grant you your warrior name. From this moment on, you'll be known as Silvermist. StarClan honors your cleverness and patience, and we welcome you as a full warrior of NightClan."

When her uncle faced the sun, Silvermist quickly copied the movement. She shut her eyes to the blinding blue sky, not noticing how her Clanmates hadn't started cheering yet. Only when she opened her eyes did they erupt into a chorus of voices, echoing so loudly that she was sure all of the prey had been scared out of the forest.

"Silvermist! Stormrunner!"

As their names were called, Silvermist couldn't help but feel a bit downcast. She sent a glance toward Stormrunner, wondering if he felt the same way she did. The distance between herself and her brother was nearly palpable by now, and she *hated* it, but what could she even say to clear the air? Six moons ago, they were ready to face the world together. They would have done everything to stick together through thick and thin, but now they couldn't utter a word to the other without an almost painful tension following it. Just like today—they could barely handle their interactions during their assessment, as it was the most he'd spoken to her since the ceremony of Cricketfern and Waspcatcher.

"Silvermist! Woo-hoo!" As if the thought had cued it, Silvermist heard a singular voice ringing above the rest of the cheers. She

tensed a bit and turned her head to meet Cricketfern's brilliant amber eyes. Despite her distance over the past moon and a half, he still showed her as much kindness and affection as ever. The sight made her heart twist with the guilt that bloomed. *I'm such a mouse-heart, aren't I?* she thought miserably. *Punishing others for things that I'm only afraid of happening—what if Stormrunner* is *right, though? If I'm not careful, I could end up just like Mintwillow—couldn't I?*

Suddenly, the friendliness and encouragement in Cricketfern's amber eyes was replaced by a look of an almost sad kind of understanding. Though Silvermist willed him not to look at her like that, she held his gaze almost unwaveringly, trying to ignore the way her heart throbbed painfully in her chest.

"Silvermist, congratulations!" Rookshade's friendly voice interrupted the gazes that she and Cricketfern sent each other. "My father told me what happened today; it sounded like you handled the situation like a pro!"

"T-Thanks, Rook," Silvermist murmured shyly as she forced a happier expression into her muzzle. "It was nothing, really. They said they don't even attack apprentices." A flicker in Rookshade's eyes hinted that he might have seen the silent exchange of emotions between her and Cricketfern, though he said nothing of it, much to Silvermist's relief. Instead, he continued talking light-heartedly about the rogues, and she felt herself slowly relax into the conversation.

Chapter Eighteen

Silvermist pushed through the snow alongside her Clanmates as they approached the Gathering Stones. Beyond the wall of foliage that surrounded the clearing, she could hear the chattering of other Clans, and she picked up the fresh scents of BlazeClan, MistClan, and SwiftClan. *RushClan must be running late, as well,* she mused as Thistlestar led them into the moonlit clearing. Just as they emerged, the plants bordering the opposite side of the clearing rustled with the arrival of RushClan, though this time they were led by Ripplewater, the broad-shouldered deputy. None of the leaders said anything as both she and Thistlestar climbed onto the Tallrock, though their surprise was nearly tangible.

When her Clanmates all found spots beneath Thistlestar, Silvermist very nearly went to the apprentices' spot out of habit. She caught herself and, as she was turning to join the warriors, she noticed Lilypaw and her brother, Webpaw, were both where the apprentices sat. *I thought they were older than us; surely they've received their warrior names, too.* Suddenly, Waspcatcher walked past her—toward the RushClan apprentices. Silvermist watched as the golden-speckled tom tilted his head curiously with a question, then beckoned toward himself with his tail.

Silvermist turned away from them and focused her attention back on the Clanmates around her. Stormrunner made a point of having a few cats between them—Sandfoot and Dawnstrike, neither of whom seemed to notice how they were used as a wall between the siblings. Holding back a sigh, Silvermist merely shook her head softly.

"Oh, Wasp, let's sit with Silv!" Lilypaw's cheerful voice demanded Silvermist's attention again, and she quickly turned her head to greet the cat she'd grown to call her friend.

"Hi, Lily!" she murmured, offering a friendly expression with her eyes briefly closed. "You're not still an apprentice, are you? I know you're both a moon or so older than I am."

Lilypaw shuffled a bit while Webpaw looked embarrassed at her side. "Well, we had our final assessments and passed, but our ceremonies got delayed for now." The light brown molly glanced up at the Tallrock, and Silvermist followed her gaze.

"Does Wolfstar's absence have anything to do with that?" Silvermist murmured without realizing. With her ears now heating up with embarrassment, she added, "I'm sorry, you don't have to answer that—I was just thinking aloud."

"Relax, it's fine," Lilypaw laughed a bit at the NightClan warrior. "Ripplewater will announce it anyways, so I might as well tell you that the two things are related. What about you, though? Waspcatcher said there aren't anymore NightClan apprentices—you and Stormpaw earned your warrior names, right?"

"That's right," the silver-point molly responded with a nod. "I'm Silvermist now, and my brother is Stormrunner!"

"I hope I get a name as cool as that!" Webpaw spoke up for the first time, surprising Silvermist. "Lilypaw and I have been thinking about what we'll get, and I can't think of *anything* that sounds cool with *Web*."

"I'm sure Wolfstar will give you both good names," Waspcatcher mewed reassuringly, the tone catching Silvermist off guard. Before she could make note of his unusually friendly demeanor, though, the leaders motioned for silence from the cats below them. Silvermist turned to face them, noticing how Buzzardstar stood as if she wanted to speak first. When none of the other leaders made a move to stop her, she did exactly that.

"Ripplewater," the brown-and-white tabby mewed slowly with a tone that bordered on uncertainty, "is there something you need to announce? Should we be calling you Ripplestar, now?"

Shock seemed to ripple across the crowd, but Silvermist wasn't quite sure why. Even Ripplewater seemed surprised by the direct question. *Buzzardstar has been the most straightforward and outspoken of them all, if you don't count Wolfstar's antagonistic comments,* she thought to herself while eyeing the leaders and the RushClan

deputy. *It only makes sense that she would be the one to question this.*

"StarClan, no," Ripplewater mewed after a moment, her words rushed as she grew flustered by the attention on her. The silver molly recovered quickly and kept speaking. "Not yet, at least. Wolfstar has . . . er . . . fallen ill with a particularly nasty bout of greencough, and I'm stepping in for him until he recovers." Despite her intimidating appearance, Ripplewater seemed surprisingly friendly to Silvermist. She was nearly as approachable as Lichenstar, who was nothing if not soft-spoken and kind.

"Well, go on, then," Buzzardstar pressed when Ripplewater fell silent. "I'm sure there's other news to share with us, no?" Even though she sounded serious, Silvermist caught a teasing twitch of her whiskers when the BlazeClan leader addressed Ripplewater.

"Oh, yes! R-Rosefall actually stayed behind to look after Wolfstar, and Riverflower has come in her place, *which* is something I wanted to announce!" When she finished the jumbled sentence, the molly nodded her head decisively and started to recover from her embarrassment. "Riverflower has been welcomed as a full medicine cat, and our warrior, Sootmask, has retired. Err—one of you can take over now, if you'd like."

While Vinestar started to step forward, Silvermist kept her eyes glued to Ripplewater. Beside her, she heard a hushed, *"It's so embarrassing—how Riverflower got her full name before us, and medicine cats get longer training!"* from Webpaw, and then another quick, *"Shut it! Vinestar is about to speak!"* from Lilypaw. The warrior stifled a small chuckle, not even having to turn to know that the older cats were probably batting playfully at each other.

"Life in SwiftClan is starting to improve again," Vinestar spoke simply; she sounded much more sure of herself than the previous Gatherings. "Bristlehawk and Goosepounce are finally showing a promising recovery, and nobody else is sick. Our warrior, Sorrelfrost, has also moved into the nursery!" The pale grey tabby sent a knowing glance at Thistlestar, who took it as his cue to step forward.

"In that case, I'm sure Sandfoot would love to visit when it's

appropriate," Thistlestar commented, his voice dripping with amusement as he gazed down at the pale orange tom. Silvermist glanced over to him and saw that he was sitting upright, his amber eyes glowing with happiness. "There's not much to announce for NightClan. Rogues are still trying to stir up trouble, but we've not let it get the best of us. We also have two new warriors to announce —Silvermist and Stormrunner!"

When the attention of the clearing fell to her—and, of course, Stormrunner—Silvermist forced her chest outward with pride. Even though being under so many gazes made her fur crawl and her ears burn, she refused to let it show. Soon enough, the attention would be back on the leaders, and everything would be fine.

"NightClan seems to have plenty of young warriors now, Thistlestar," Buzzardstar commented. Just as Silvermist had predicted, the attention of the Clans immediately shifted to the leader. "Those rogues won't stand a chance."

"They certainly don't," Thistlestar responded with a cheerful nod, closing his eyes briefly with the motion. "Would you like to go next, Buzzardstar?"

"Absolutely," the brown-and-white tabby stepped forward swiftly. "Our deputy, Amberlight, is expecting kits and has moved into the nursery to nurse and raise them. Wildrunner has stepped in as deputy for the time being, but as soon as she's able to, Amberlight plans on returning to her duties. We've also lost Mousetail to greencough, but luckily enough our other elders didn't catch it. Lichenstar?"

With the BlazeClan announcements quickly taken care of, Buzzardstar turned to the final leader and motioned for her to come forward. As those on top of the Tallrock shuffled about, however, Silvermist caught sight of a movement in her peripheral vision. She turned her head slightly to get a better look and noticed that Stormrunner was *slowly* creeping toward the edges of the clearing. When Lichenstar's voice echoed into her ears, Silvermist held back a frown and turned her attention back to the MistClan leader.

"We've also lost a few elders," the fluffy ginger molly started, her

eyes rounded with sadness. "Jaggedwhisker and Crowsong both passed away from greencough. Thanks to Emberflame's efforts, though, the other elders didn't get anything worse than whitecough. Our deputy, Houndstone, has also retired, and Beetlewhisper has taken his place as deputy. I'd like to add, if I may, that I'm quite pleased with the lack of tension tonight." Lichenstar sent an almost teasing glance at Thistlestar, and then at Ripplewater, who both looked a bit flustered by her boldness.

"I'm just doing my best. I know he's difficult at times, but we're hoping that Wolfstar will make a swift recovery," Ripplewater mewed, adding a sheepish chuckle at the end of her response. Silvermist narrowed her eyes a bit at the pointed way the molly looked down at her Clanmates with her words. "If it isn't too much to ask, perhaps we could extend the discussion period tonight? My warriors could use the friendly banter with everyone, just this once."

"I don't see an issue with that," Buzzardstar decided before the other leaders had a chance to speak. "A good relationship between our warriors leads to an even better relationship between the Clans as a whole. Do any of you object?"

When the other three leaders glanced between each other, and then offered shrugs of indifference, Buzzardstar motioned for the cats in the clearing to continue mingling. Silvermist didn't move at first as she watched the four leaders get comfortable with the RushClan deputy at their side. Part of her wanted to see where Stormrunner was sneaking off to, but she knew Lilypaw would hardly let her go without questioning her. *Unlike Waspcatcher, she's perfectly aware of her surroundings even when her crush has her attention,* she thought with a glance at the two cats.

Just as she had suspected, Waspcatcher and Lilypaw were already deep in a conversation. Sometimes Webpaw would speak his mind, and every so often, Lilypaw would glance in Silvermist's direction. There was certainly no following Stormrunner with the RushClan cats' presence.

"Hey, Silvermist," Lilypaw spoke suddenly, as if she had read her mind. Her tone was teasing, though, and Silvermist's stomach

dropped at the thought of what she was about to say. "Where's Cricketfern at? Usually you're together—your silvery fur glistens even more with the moonlight reflecting off of the snow, he'd be in such a daze!"

Immediately Silvermist felt her entire body burn with embarrassment. She said nothing, though—even if she *wanted* to offer a response, she knew her words would be stuck in her throat. Instead, she held Lilypaw's playful gaze and suffered through a painfully awkward silence.

"What?" the brown molly asked after a moment, her amusement faltering.

"Looks like they weren't as promising as you thought, Lilypaw," Webpaw commented dryly, thought Silvermist swore she saw a hint of relieved amusement in his eyes. Before she had time to analyze him again, though, Waspcatcher's not-so-subtle whisper caught her attention.

"She's been having a moment and hasn't spoken to Cricketfern much at all." Suddenly, Waspcatcher's face looked all too claw-worthy, and Silvermist quickly sent him a glare. He merely responded by scowling at her and saying, "That *moment* has lasted well over a moon, though."

"Silvermist!" Lilypaw gasped, her eyes widening in disbelief. "You two would have been so cute together! What happened?" Once again, Silvermist found herself at a loss for words, and she visibly cringed when Waspcatcher spoke for her.

"She's been hanging out more with Rookshade, who was an apprentice with us for a few moons. I don't see the appeal, though. They hardly even talked before!"

Silvermist's shame was suddenly far too much to suffer through, and ducked her head to the three cats. "Excuse me for a moment," she muttered, sending a final glare in Waspcatcher's direction before retreating toward the edge of the clearing.

Though her embarrassment had been wholly genuine, Silvermist

quickly realized she could also use it as an excuse to leave the conversation and follow her brother without raising suspicion. *I don't think I could have gone any longer without swiping at Waspcatcher,* her thoughts tumbled through her mind, and she realized she was almost too exasperated to think clearly. With a soft sigh, she slowly nosed her way into the hedges and followed Stormrunner's trail. Up ahead, she heard voices, and realized that they were unpleasantly familiar.

"Storm . . . ?" she called softly, her body hesitating on its own. The voices silenced themselves, and Silvermist silently cursed herself before forcing her body forward. When she peeked through the branches, she saw Stormrunner sitting with a distinctive large molly and a small black-and-white tom. Silvermist immediately recognized the molly as Sister Shade, and remembered that the tom had been in the attack on a hunting patrol moons prior.

"Well, hello there," the tom purred when Silvermist met his gaze. "Who's this ray of moonlight?" He drawled his words out, and Silvermist immediately felt uncomfortable under his stare.

"Badger, don't even start," Stormrunner snapped quickly.

"Don't tell me this is the molly you're interested in, Storm!" the tom, Badger, feigned a surprised expression. "She's way out of your league!"

"That's my *sister,* you absolute *hare-brain,"* Stormrunner cursed, visibly angered by Badger's behavior.

Silvermist watched them cautiously, noticing how Stormrunner swiped at the *rogue* with his claws sheathed. *What— what is he doing here with these rogues? Why does he seem so comfortable?* Her previous discomfort was immediately replaced with suspicion and disbelief as she eyed the cats in front of her. Sister Shade seemed unamused by the two toms' antics, her amber eyes instead set on Silvermist.

"So, we meet again," the large molly spoke, stepping between the two toms briefly to catch their attention. "And it seems you've earned your title as a warrior since we last met. Your name is

Silvermist, then?"

Silvermist didn't utter a single word as she held Sister Shade's intense stare. She was acutely aware of her brother's silence, and knew without looking that he was stunned at the molly's words. The grey cat's words pierced Silvermist with an unspoken, deeper meaning. *She wants something, but what?* Silvermist wondered, mentally preparing herself for a fight.

"What, is she shy or something?" Badger asked when Silvermist refused to speak. She dared a glance at the tom and was relieved to see that his flirtatious expressions had vanished. *It better stay this way, if he knows what's best for him,* she thought sourly before returning her gaze to Shade.

"I thought the same, Badger," Sister Shade murmured, the edge of her mouth twitching as if she were resisting the urge to smirk. "No, she's not shy. She's observing us. You know, she could be of use to us—this is the second time she's snuck up on *me.* That's not easy to do."

Silvermist continued to hold the rogue's gaze, careful not to let her thoughts show on her face. For some reason, she felt like Sister Shade had almost *expected* her to follow Stormrunner here, yet she seemed genuine with every other word.

"S-Sister Shade, I don't think—" Stormrunner started quickly, his green eyes widening with surprise.

"Do not speak over me, Storm," Sister Shade quickly interrupted, her gaze finally shifting away from Silvermist, but only for a moment. Her amber eyes were quickly set on Silvermist again, more intense than before. "I wasn't finished. What if I offered you a place within my followers? We could use a sharp mind like yours."

"Surely not," Silvermist quickly decided on a response and tried to pick her words carefully. "I'm not as good as you say I am."

"Oh?" Shade twitched her whiskers, looking almost amused by Silvermist's words. "Are you saying I'm a poor judge of character?"

The warrior immediately felt like had said something wrong and eyed Sister Shade more carefully before saying, "Of course not. After all, your followers have outsmarted my Clanmates for moons, now —they're clearly the best of the best, so you must have a keen eye. It's just that I'm certain that I'm nowhere near as skilled as they are."

"Is that what you think?" Sister Shade pressed, curiosity glinting in her eyes.

"Yes," Silvermist responded slowly, sneaking a glance at Stormrunner. "Though, it seems like they weren't entirely without help."

For a few moments, silence engulfed the four cats. Both Stormrunner and Badger now bore gravely serious expressions, their eyes locked on Shade as she watched Silvermist closely. *How much does she think I know?* she wondered when she realized Shade might not be fooled by her words.

"Well," Sister Shade spoke after a few moments, her eyes still trained on Silvermist. "If you truly think you're not fit to join us, could you at least help me with *one* little issue I've been struggling with?"

". . . What is it?" Silvermist asked warily, not trusting a single one of the molly's words.

"You see, we've been looking for one of your Clanmates," the towering cat made herself sound sheepish, but Silvermist could tell she was putting up an almost deliberately poor act. "They seem to have simply vanished without a trace, but I have a feeling you might know where they've gone to."

Silvermist ignored the pit that formed in her stomach as she asked, "Who is it you're searching for?" Beside Sister Shade, Stormrunner looked confused, and she decided that even her brother hadn't been asked such a question.

"The cat we're looking for is a molly named Mintwillow." Sister Shade paused abruptly, as if she were studying Silvermist's reaction.

The warrior forced herself to remain guarded at the mention of her mother, and when Shade saw this, she continued. "She stole something from a friend of mine, and even *rogues* like us don't tolerate thieves. Originally, we simply wanted to speak with her—strike a deal of sorts to make up for how she's wronged us. Recently, however, we found out that she might have left what she stole in your Clan. Would you happen to know anything about this?"

"I can't say I know anyone named Mintwillow," Silvermist mewed coolly after a moment. *What could they possibly want with her? Don't tell me her mate was one of Sister Shade's followers,* she thought darkly as she eyed the rogues before her. "You must have been misinformed; perhaps she belongs to another Clan."

"Is that your final answer?" Shade pressed, still eyeing Silvermist. She tried not to let her gaze unsettle her as she nodded.

"Yes. There is no Mintwillow in NightClan." Silvermist gave a final nod and turned back toward where she had come from. "I'll be taking my leave now, my friends are probably missing me. Oh, and Stormrunner? I hope you know what you're doing." She hardly spared her brother a glance and started padding away, but Sister Shade spoke one last time.

"It's unfortunate to learn that we were so ill informed," the molly meowed slowly, and Silvermist could feel her eyes burning into her pelt. "Regardless, you've piqued my interest, Silvermist. If we meet again, it would certainly be in *your* interest to reconsider my offer."

The warrior said nothing, not even glancing over her shoulder at the rogues before she picked up her movement again. She weaved through the branches and plants carefully, trying not to draw attention to herself or the rogues. *What could he possibly be thinking?* She thought incredulously once she made her way back into the clearing. Much to her relief, the crowds were still chattering away, and the leaders didn't seem too eager to end such a lively Gathering. It wasn't long before Lilypaw found her again, and Silvermist set aside her worries in preparation of the molly's criticisms.

"Silvermist, I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable earlier!" Lilypaw blurted quickly, surprising the NightClan warrior. "I'm sorry, I'm sure you have your reasons for what happened."

"No, it's okay," she quickly assured the older molly. "I just needed a moment to breathe."

"Are you sure?" the RushClan apprentice fretted. Her yellow eyes were round with worry, and Silvermist felt a twinge of guilt as she realized how rude it was for her to leave so suddenly.

"Absolutely—I'm fine," Silvermist insisted quickly, trying to sound as friendly as possible. "Let's go back to Waspcatcher and Webpaw. If you want, I can try to explain myself some other time, okay?"

With that, Lilypaw seemed satisfied, and the two mollies quickly returned to their friends. Silvermist was beyond relieved when Waspcatcher didn't bring up his brother again, and the rest of the Gathering went without a hitch. After some time, she saw Stormrunner return to the clearing. Instead of joining the younger cats, though, her brother found his way to Dawnstrike, and the two of them quickly fell into hushed whispers. Silvermist eyed them both before giving her friends her full attention; Dawnstrike and Stormrunner certainly didn't need her to watch over them more than she already did.

Chapter Nineteen

The crunching of the snow beneath Stormrunner's paws nearly drove him mad as he trudged along the border with RushClan. Just ahead of him was Falconwing, and at his side was Waspcatcher; their voices carried easily across the thin leafbare air as they spoke casually, and the sound almost seemed to echo off of the snow. One particular sentence caught Stormrunner's attention and he found himself grimacing after Falconwing spoke.

"Too bad the river's mostly frozen," the dark grey tom mewed with a glance toward the icy sheet beside them. "We could totally try to catch fish."

"Gross—" Stormrunner's tongue moved before he could even realize it. "Just, no."

"I think it would've been a good idea," Waspcatcher came to the older tom's defense, though Falconwing hardly seemed offended by Stormrunner's response. "The prey in the forest has been running pretty thin—if it gets any worse, we could start starving!"

"You're both disgusting," Stormrunner grumbled when he considered the idea of eating fish. "Besides, a few nights of hunger wouldn't kill you. Don't be so dramatic."

The conversation ceased at that, and the dark grey tom couldn't help but feel victorious when Waspcatcher shot him an annoyed glance. Falconwing only let out a short and quiet snort of amusement as they pressed onward, seemingly unbothered by Stormrunner's attitude. *That's a first,* he realized he had almost been counting on the annoyance of both his Clanmates. Few cats would disregard his temper and quick tongue—though, he realized he shouldn't be too surprised considering two of those cats were Falconwing's siblings.

Over the river, he spotted movement and recognized a few cats from RushClan. Lilypaw and Webpaw were the first he noticed, and

he vaguely recalled seeing Troutslip before, as well. The other tom was one he didn't know for sure, though; a brown-furred tom with near-black markings on his face. While he was trying to identify the cats, Stormrunner hadn't realized that Falconwing and Waspcatcher had both noticed the other patrol and nearly ran into their stilled forms.

"Lilypaw!" Waspcatcher called before any of them could utter a word. "Hi!"

"H-Hey," Lilypaw meowed back after glancing hesitantly at her Clanmates. "It's, ah, actually Lilypetal now." Stormrunner held back a frown at her tone. With the air void of the sound of rushing water, he quickly detected a hint of uneasiness in her quiet voice.

"Oh, that's great!" Waspcatcher continued, oblivious to the rising tension. "So Wolfstar got better, then?"

At his words, the entire RushClan patrol exchanged dark glances. Stormrunner grimaced at the spike of tension in the air and shot a glance at Falconwing, who returned a worried gaze. *At least one of them can take a hint,* he thought sourly and returned his sights to the cats across the river. When nobody said anything for a few moments, Stormrunner sighed and opened his mouth to speak only to be cut off by Webpaw.

"No," the dark brown tom murmured slowly, his expression impassive. "He lost his remaining lives to the illness. Ripplestar gave us our names." His willingness to reveal the information shocked Stormrunner into shutting his mouth again. Apparently the RushClan cats felt the same, as they all stared at Web—certainly it wasn't Webpaw anymore—in astonishment.

"Webheart!" the other, unidentified brown cat hissed loudly, clearly disgruntled by the revelation. *There it is,* Stormrunner thought as he eyed the patrol. *Webheart.*

"What?" Webheart rolled his eyes a bit at how his older Clanmate scolded him. "It's not like they hadn't guessed it already, Toadpounce. It'd be better to say it straight rather than leave them speculating."

Once more, a silence fell over the river. The only sound was that of the wind blowing over the ice, its gentle howl reminding Stormrunner of the frigid temperatures. The air between the two patrols was now awkward rather than tense, though the other Clan clearly had no intention of adding to the exchange of words.

"Let's keep moving," Falconwing spoke up suddenly, giving Waspcatcher a pointed glance. "I'm sorry to hear about Wolfstar; may he rest in StarClan."

If the slip of information wasn't about their leader's death, Stormrunner might have laughed at how embarrassed Waspcatcher looked. Instead, he felt himself feeling something akin to what he could only call secondhand-embarrassment. For several fox-leaps, the three warriors continued their patrol in a heavy silence. Stormrunner eyed his Clanmates carefully, wondering what they thought of Wolfstar's passing. Were they relieved that he wasn't around to pick more fights with the other Clans, or . . . ?

Falconwing sucked in a breath of air before Stormrunner could let his mind travel further, though he didn't mention Wolfstar or the RushClan cats when he spoke. "Do you think the rogues are going to keep attacking?" His voice, deep like his father's, sounded rather thoughtful.

"They wouldn't have pushed us for this long just to stop," Waspcatcher stated matter-of-factly. Though Stormrunner found himself rolling his eyes, he couldn't help the guilt that started creeping up his spine at the mention of the rogues. *Is it too late to back out of this?* he wondered with his eyes set on his Clanmates. *Or am I in too deep?* Ever since Silvermist had stumbled upon his meeting with Sister Shade and Badger, the rogues had become strangely interested in him—more so than before. Even Badger, as irritating as he could be, seemed to act out of . . . respect, almost, toward Stormrunner. Sister Shade had even started urging him to meet Oasis, her second-in-command. *She must not know that I was watching when they first met Silvermist,* he thought as his eyes slowly trailed away from the forms of his fellow warriors.

Suddenly, Stormrunner hesitated in his step. He'd detected a strange sound, though neither Falconwing nor Waspcatcher had

noticed it yet. It sounded as though the frozen undergrowth was being trampled underfoot; he recognized the sound of ice-covered leaves thrashing easily, and it was most certainly coming toward them. He narrowed his eyes and froze in his spot, turning toward the direction of the sound. Ahead of him, the two denmates mimicked his movements, seeming to notice the sound at last. Then, Sandfoot burst into view, his breath coming out in thick, white clouds as his chest heaved.

"There's been an emergency," he grunted quickly, swinging his head in a beckoning motion. "Thistlestar wants all of the patrols to return immediately." The pale orange tom hardly uttered another word before spinning around and leading them back the way he had come from.

Stormrunner swiftly started to follow him in silence alongside Falconwing and Waspcatcher. His Clanmate's abrupt speech and hurried pace set his nerves off; Sandfoot was usually more laid-back and soft spoken, even during tense situations. *Whatever happened, it must be serious,* he thought, his stomach twisting in anticipation. *Did the rogues attack again? Was somebody hurt this time?* This would have been the first attack since he had earned his warrior name, though he assumed he would have been informed of something like this, right?

Once they reached the camp, Stormrunner opened his mouth to try and get a sense for what happened. He didn't detect blood-scent, though he wasn't entirely sure he could have over the panicked aura that emanated from the camp. Sandfoot silently led them into the clearing, and Stormrunner could see that nobody was injured, though Rowanspots and Icemint stood uneasily just outside the medicine den.

"Falconwing," Wrenfeather called to them as soon as he spotted them. Stormrunner shifted his gaze to the side, noticing how Thistlestar tried to calm the rest of their Clanmates. "Did you happen to see Ferrettail during your patrol?"

"No," Falconwing responded swiftly, standing rigid as he addressed the deputy. "What's going on?" Wrenfeather fell silent, sending his gaze over toward the tense Thistlestar. Stormrunner

followed his gaze, watching his uncle closely as he turned away from their Clanmates.

"He's gone missing," the white-furred tom spoke, his voice grim. "There is a single trail in the snow leading away from the camp, but it ends abruptly. There are no scent trails near it—we don't know what happened." Stormrunner held back a frown, though he was sure his feelings were displayed in his gaze at his point. Ferrettail had vanished, seemingly into thin air. Hesitantly, he dared a glance around to catch sight of Dawnstrike, but the cream-furred molly looked as unsettled as the rest of them. No, it was wrong to suspect her; sure, she and Ferrettail were more fond of the rogues than Stormrunner was, but he knew they wouldn't abandon the Clan. They couldn't. *What if this is related to Mintwillow's disappearance?* The thought struck Stormrunner like a bolt of lightning; Ferrettail and Mintwillow were, at some point, friends. He was sure of that much.

"What do we do?" Newtsplash's worried voice broke through the silence that had followed Thistlestar's voice.

"Thistlestar, this is the second disappearance we've had in only a few moons—right after the rogues started their scheming, too!" Dovesong nodded from the tortoiseshell molly's side, her normally well-groomed fur spiking up with fear.

"What if our Clanmates are joining them?" Surprisingly enough, Waspcatcher spoke softly from Stormrunner's side. The dark grey tom quickly snapped his eyes toward his denmate, hating how his uncharacteristically quiet voice seemed to echo above the others.

"Yeah, it's no secret that Mintwillow used to know them—" Sandfoot quickly agreed, causing Stormrunner's fur to stand on end. *I was able to pinpoint the similarities easily enough,* he thought, *So, why does it bother me when* they *do?*

"That's enough!" Thistlestar ordered quickly, his amber eyes narrowed. "Ferrettail might have had issues sometimes, but he was an upstanding warrior, just like the rest of us. And Mintwillow, she —" Stormrunner watched as his uncle broke off, clearly struggling to find his words. Silently, he willed Thistlestar to catch his gaze.

Even after the moons that had passed, somehow he felt like his uncle knew more than he was letting on. Just was Thistlestar's gaze was about to reach Stormrunner's, Lynxtail's voice rose from outside the elder's den.

"She wouldn't have joined the rogues," the elder spoke. Stormrunner whipped his head around to peer at her and heard Thistlestar voice his gratitude toward the elder. At Lynxtail's side was Mistypool, whose green eyes were round with sadness.

Murmuring broke out across the gathered crowds, and Stormrunner could see that many still looked uncertain. Even though he knew Mintwillow hadn't joined the rogues, hearing his Clanmates continue to defend her honor filled him with a burning rage. *How can you all act like she was some noble warrior?* his thoughts flared aggressively. *You all knew she was involved with the rogues—you* knew *my father was a rogue, too, I'm certain of it. And when she pretended Silvermist and I didn't exist, you turned a blind eye!*

"If you doubt the cats who have vanished, then you've failed as their Clanmates," Lynxtail continued suddenly, her voice firm. Even though she was older than the other elders, she hardly acted like it. "My nephew and Mintwillow certainly weren't without their faults, but none of us are. I believe in them—whatever happened to them, I believe in my Clanmates."

"Beautifully spoken, Lynxtail," Thistlestar mewed, sounding relieved when the murmurs seemed to settle down. Stormrunner couldn't be so easily pleased, though.

"Then, what do we do?" Dovesong spoke up again. Even though she had straightened out her fur, her voice was taut with anxiety.

"We need to be on our guard," the leader responded with a sudden certainty. "Clearly there's *something* amiss around here, but we need to trust each other more than ever before."

"Sir?" Cindertalon's voice rang out clearly, though when Stormrunner glanced at him, he looked hesitant. When Thistlestar said nothing, he continued to speak. "If it's worth anything—I doubt Mintwillow would join the rogues she and I once knew. Once you

cut your ties with them, well, they aren't the type to forgive. As for Ferrettail . . . I can't say for certain whether he *is* with them, since we were never close, but the rogues we've spotted aren't . . . well, they don't take hostages." Stormrunner found himself frowning at the truth in his words. Sister Shade was *unnervingly* interested in the whereabouts of Mintwillow, and her amber eyes looked almost violent when he saw her ask Silvermist about it. Then, he remembered how they attacked a hunting patrol when he was still an apprentice—they hadn't seemed to recognize Cindertalon then, so how did *he* know *them* so well?

"What are you saying, Cindertalon?" Thistlestar spoke quickly, his amber eyes darkening only for a moment. Cindertalon opened his mouth to speak, but Stormrunner beat him to it.

"If Ferrettail is with them, he's there willingly." Stormrunner's voice was almost uncontrollably dark as he spoke. For the first time since he had entered the camp, he caught Dawnstrike's eye, but she was giving him a pointed glare that he decided to ignore. Did she think Ferrettail actually joined them? They always told him that they were only doing this to be better warriors for the Clan.

"He wouldn't do that, though," Wrenfeather responded quickly, shaking his head. "Putting aside the fact that we're family, I mentored Ferrettail. I know he got more . . . reserved, with time, even more when Warblerwing died, but—well, I know he wouldn't do something like that." The deputy met Stormrunner's gaze, and there was an unmistakable flash of suspicion in his bright green eyes that made his most recent apprentice regret speaking up in the first place. *He certainly didn't seem too fond of you, though,* Stormrunner thought suddenly and remembered how Ferrettail had criticized Wrenfeather during his early apprenticeship.

"Don't forget what Thistlestar said." Dawnstrike's voice surprised Stormrunner more than the rest, and he tried to catch her gaze, but she wouldn't look at him again. "We can't be suspecting each other right now. The rogues have been antagonizing us, Wolfstar has tried to cause an argument at almost every Gathering lately, and two warriors have vanished. Ferrettail was my *friend,* he— he wouldn't endanger the rest of us. Not like this."

"Dawn . . . ?" Thistlestar's quiet, yet shocked voice sounded in response. His emotions mimicked Stormrunner's own feelings, though he suspected his uncle's shock was for different reasons.

"Uh . . . speaking of Wolfstar—" Waspcatcher mewed, looking hesitant yet thoughtful. "RushClan isn't likely to cause more issues, I don't think. During our patrol, we found out from a passing group that Wolfstar passed away."

"We could have waited until the next Gathering to find out," Wrenfeather criticized his son quickly, as if they weren't in the middle of discussing the disappearance of a Clanmate. "It's disrespectful to spread the news of another Clan like that."

"R-Right, sorry," the golden-brown speckled tom apologized quickly, eliciting an eye roll from Stormrunner. *It was right to tell the Clan—Wolfstar was nothing short of problematic,* he thought bitterly as he recalled the scruffy tom's behavior. Surely, the news of Ripplestar's new leadership would be good to spread around. With a start, Stormrunner realized how grateful he was for the death of another cat. The realization made him feel a bit strange—a sensation that almost matched the image of the murky waters in his dreams, and he hardly noticed when Falconwing spoke once more.

"I'd like to see the trail that Ferrettail left, if that's okay," the muscular grey tom mewed slowly, his eyes narrowed as if he were deep in thought. Stormrunner shook himself back to reality and stepped forward.

"I'd like to see, as well," he mumbled, hoping a trip back outside of the camp would rid him of the grimy feeling that had just encompassed him.

Thistlestar turned to them, eyeing them carefully before giving a nod. "Alright, sure. Silvermist, can you show them where it is?"

Stormrunner held back a cringe when Silvermist wordlessly stepped out of the crowd and led the two toms out of the camp. He tried not to let his tension show and decided to keep some space between himself and his Clanmates; he was admittedly more curious than worried about the situation, and seeing the strange

trail was more important than keeping the distance from his sister. He eyed Falconwing as they walked, then shifted his gaze back toward his sister and the snowy path she led them to.

Just as his Clanmates had described, there was a clear trail leading towards a spot clear of any foliage and trees. And again, as they had described it, it ended abruptly. Stormrunner eyed it for a few moments, tilting his head. Suddenly, he had an idea. If Ferrettail backtracked over his own path he could have vanished like this, but—back to where? He looked back along the path and noticed a tree trunk with more scuffed snow than the rest of the trail. *Did everyone miss this?*

"Do you think a hawk could have snatched him?" Falconwing spoke up, looking uneasy for once.

"I don't think a hawk would go for a grown warrior like that," Stormrunner decided quickly, shooting the grey tom what he hoped was a reassuring glance. "Ferrettail wasn't the smallest of warriors, either, you know."

"There would be some kind of sign here," Silvermist added quietly. Both toms quickly looked at her, and Stormrunner realized how pensive her blue eyes had become. *Don't you dare—* "There's no unusually scuffed snow at the end of the trail. What if he doubled back over his own pawprints? I— I know Thistlestar said not to suspect anyone, and I know he was your mentor, Falconwing, but I can't help but think of how the rogues used the trees to hide their movements."

Falconwing said nothing and glanced upward toward the canopy of the forest. After shooting his sister a quick glance, Stormrunner followed his gaze and glanced quickly between branches. Above the tree he had noticed before, he could see that the thin layer of snow on the branches had been disturbed—along with the snow along other branches leading through the territory. *Silvermist, why did you have to say that?* he thought almost desperately. *You're too smart for your own good. What can we do with this information, after we were told to trust one another?* Stormrunner's conflicted mess of emotions swirled together until they turned into the one emotion he knew best; anger. Without offering another word to his Clanmates, he

spun around to return to the camp. Up until now, he had almost been hoping that Ferrettail didn't join the rogues, but now there was almost no denying it.

Chapter Twenty

Silvermist perked her ears as she trudged through the damp layer of snow. Only a few pawsteps ahead of her was Newtsplash and Waspcatcher, and even further ahead was Cindertalon. She could see her Clanmates peering intently into the forest as they neared the clearing where Twolegs bring their dogs during greenleaf. Though Thistlestar had long since ceased the search parties, they continued to keep an eye out for Ferrettail. Silvermist had a good idea of what had happened, and the look Stormrunner had given her when she spoke her theory only confirmed her suspicions.

She knew better than to voice it to the rest of her Clanmates, though—if Thistlestar wanted them to trust each other, she had to keep it to herself for now. *If others vanish, I'll bring it up to him in private,* she mused decidedly. When they passed the worn Twoleg site, Silvermist found herself hesitating as she caught scent of something strange. She glanced through the ice-covered foliage, searching the clearing for a sign of what almost smelled like *blood.* As far as she could see, there was none, but she fell back a bit and looked harder—maybe she had missed it.

Then, on the other side of the clearing, she saw a flash of brown just before a creature emerged with its nose held low to the ground. She could see a faint outline of bones beneath its speckled brown-and-black pelt, and drool dripped from its narrow snout. *Is that . . . ? That's how Cindertalon described dogs,* Silvermist quickly realized before shuddering a bit. With a glance at the patrol, she noticed that the closest to her was Waspcatcher, and she held back a cringe as she called to him with a hushed tone.

"Waspcatcher!" As she whispered rather loudly, Silvermist kept her eyes locked on the strange-looking creature.

". . . what?" Waspcatcher grumbled after making his way back to her, clearly still stuck on what he had said to her during one of the more recent Gatherings. Silvermist ignored the urge to roll her eyes

at him and nodded to the creature.

"Do you think that's a dog?" she asked quietly, narrowing her eyes as it drew nearer. "I thought Twolegs only came here during greenleaf, but it looks . . . kind of how I'd imagine a dog to look."

"Yeah, actually," the golden tom mumbled, his green eyes widening in confusion when he noticed it. "Where are its Twolegs? And why does it look so *underfed?"*

By now, Cindertalon had noticed their absence, and Silvermist heard the sound of snow crunching as he and Newtsplash circled back to find their missing partners. She could barely see their forms out of the corner of her eye when her old mentor's voice reached her.

"What in Silverpelt are you—" Cindertalon seemed to freeze midstep when he saw what had caught Silvermist's attention, and his voice dropped to a whisper. *"Oh, no."*

"Cindertalon," Silvermist continued in her hushed tone, glancing at the older warriors briefly. When she saw them, she realized that both of their pelts had bristled until they were twice their normal size. Suddenly, feelings of dread started to creep up her spine, and all she could manage to say was, "I— I thought dogs wouldn't be here during leafbare . . . ." Suddenly, the tawny-furred creature caught sight of the patrol and slowly bared its teeth in a low growl.

"Silver, that is *not* a dog," Cindertalon hissed, his eyes stretched wide with terror. "We need to leave. *Now."* Seeing her old mentor break his composure in such a way drove a claw of fear through Silvermist, and she took a few pawsteps backward only for her body to freeze involuntarily.

"W-What is it—?" she tried to ask right as the creature ahead of them let out a snarl. It charged toward them, its orange eyes crazed and its yellowed teeth glinting in the sunlight.

"Run!" Cindertalon's commanding voice gave Silvermist the strength she needed to turn tail and flee after her Clanmates. They all scattered, and Silvermist tried to follow suit, knowing that if

they could disorient and confuse the beast, they might come out unscathed. Her legs were already burning and her heart was pounding painfully in her chest, making it hard to breathe with each stride. The sensation of hot breath on her tail only increased the suffocating feelings she felt until smudges of black threatened the edges of her vision.

As another spear of panic threaded through her body, Silvermist realized she could barely hear the sound of snow crunching beneath her flying paws. The rancid stench of its breath seemed to engulf and overwhelm her senses as she pushed herself harder and faster in an attempt to outrun it. Swiftly—*hopefully*—she glanced at the nearby trees. After trying to blink her vision clear, she dismissed the idea and returned her weak focus to the thrusts of her legs. Whatever this monster was, it would have her in its jaws before she could make it halfway to a branch. *Oh, StarClan, this thing is going to kill me!* She had become so overwhelmed and disoriented that she hadn't noticed her Clanmates circling back to help her, nor had she heard their calls.

Suddenly, the sound of yelps and snarls erupted behind her. After pushing herself forward another leap, Silvermist took as deep a breath as she could manage and spun around with her claws raised. Instead of being met with the horrifying face of the creature, though, she was met with the sight of Stormrunner latched firmly onto its back. A flash of black crossed her vision, and she realized that Rookshade had arrived, as well. Just as he leaped forward, the other three members of her patrol burst out of the frozen undergrowth with their claws bared.

Silvermist tried to rush forward to help, as well, but froze when she realized she could hardly breathe. She forced her paws into the snow and tried to dig her claws into the frigid soil, desperately searching to regain her composure. In the end, she could only watch as her Clanmates chased off the creature, each of them narrowly escaping injury. As it fled, Silvermist finally felt her lungs ease up, though only slightly as she still found herself gasping for air.

"What *was* that thing?" Waspcatcher spoke up, his own chest heaving with the rest of the warriors'.

"That was a coyote," Cindertalon muttered after catching his breath, his tone dark. Silvermist barely noticed as he glanced over them all with concern hidden in his gaze. "They're much more aggressive than the dogs brought by Twolegs. They also don't usually attack full patrols, but the hunger of leafbare must have made it aggressive."

"You mean it could have *eaten* us?" At Waspcatcher's painfully loud whisper, Silvermist's body shuddered violently. *That thing was going to* eat *me?* she thought and felt her stomach twist at the realization.

"Wasp, that's enough," Newtsplash spoke for the first time, her eyes fixed on Silvermist's trembling form. "Silvermist looks like she can't handle much more of that talk."

When a silence followed the torbie molly's words, Silvermist became painfully aware of her own labored breathing, along with the dangerous creeping feeling that remained fastened into her spine. A little ways off, she saw Stormrunner standing silently, his jade eyes dark as he stared at the scuffed path the coyote had left. Suppressing another shudder, Silvermist let her eyes trail to the site of the battle, only to have her view blocked by Rookshade.

"Silv, are you okay?" he asked quietly, leaning towards her. "The coyote is gone—you can breathe now."

"I'm— I'm definitely trying to," the silver molly responded in between her slightly-less-painful gasps. With a deep, shaky breath, she managed to control her body's trembling; even though it became less visible, she could still feel tremors of fear traversing through her limbs.

"Hey, Newtsplash," Cindertalon mewed, seeming to have regained his own steady composure. Now, he gazed at Silvermist, his expression strangely unreadable. "Why don't you and Waspcatcher head back to the camp? Stormrunner and Rookshade, you should follow them and make sure they get back safely." The order seemed to jolt Stormrunner from his own gloomy daze as Silvermist caught a glance from him.

"And let that *thing* come back for you two?" he snapped, narrowing his eyes. "Yeah, right. I'll walk with you."

Cindertalon's eyes slowly shut, and his nose flared as if he were restraining a sigh. "Fine. You and Rookshade can scout through the undergrowth beside us while we head back—stay on opposite sides of us, and give us some space to *breathe,* please."

The rest of the cats quickly obeyed the dark grey tom's orders, though Rookshade lingered a bit longer before falling back out of sight. Slowly, Cindertalon started padding after Newtsplash and Waspcatcher, only to glance back at Silvermist when she hesitated. When she realized the warrior's attention was on her, Silvermist blinked herself out of her trance and *finally* managed to force her limbs to move. Once she picked up a slow pace beside him, her trembling ceased and her breathing started to steady.

"Does that happen often?" Cindertalon asked her after a few quiet moments. His gaze was only fixed on the forest ahead of them —any cat out of earshot would hardly know that he had spoken.

"W-What?" Silvermist stuttered, feeling her ears burn with embarrassment when she failed to offer any other response. She knew exactly what he was asking, but in her current state she could hardly carry such a basic conversation.

"The panicking . . . thing," Cindertalon seemed to cringe when he couldn't think of another way to describe what he'd witnessed. "I remember that it happened a bit during your early training—specifically your battle training, but I thought it stopped after a while." Immediately, worry trickled through Silvermist's veins. Was he regretting how easily he approved of her warrior ceremony?

"Uh— It—" Silvermist hesitated when she stumbled over her words. She took a deep breath, trying to recollect herself before offering a more coherent response. "It doesn't happen so often anymore. It's not a problem, I promise; that thing just . . . surprised me." Even though her breathing had steadied at last, she could still feel her own heartbeat faintly in her throat and in her ears.

"The coyote?" the older tom questioned as if he didn't know

exactly what she meant. "I didn't think we'd see one, honestly—it's not often that they stray into Clan territory. Perhaps we should have taught you about them more thoroughly. What triggers that reaction from you?"

Silvermist held back a wince when she realized that, much to her displeasure, he had no intention of dropping the subject. "I don't know, it just happens, I guess. Sometimes I can feel it kind of . . . building up when I'm trying to hunt, too. It's hard to explain. Maybe I just overthink things—like you said back then." She quickly looked down at the snow beneath her moving paws, still convinced that he was doubting her abilities as a warrior. "You don't have to worry, though. I'm a warrior, I can handle myself—"

"A good warrior knows when to accept the concern of their Clanmates," Cindertalon interrupted swiftly, though his tone was softer than usual, "and when to seek help, no matter the problem." Silvermist's step faltered a bit, but she tried to keep their pace. At his words, she recalled what Rookshade had said about his mother, and how the other rogues wanted to come to the Clans for help when she fell ill.

"You're right . . . ." she murmured softly, finally pulling her gaze back upward. Ahead of them, she saw the familiar walls of their camp, and relief sparked over her pelt for a moment.

"I'm glad you agree," Cindertalon paused when they were just outside of the camp entrance, and his lack of motion called for Silvermist to stop, as well. "I think you should talk to Rowanspots about it—or my daughter, if Rowan is too withdrawn. The medicine cats can help with more than just physical injuries and illnesses, you know."

"Y-You think they can help?" Silvermist mumbled, feeling downcast as Cindertalon finally led the way into the camp. *Am I really such a bad warrior?* she worried without even realizing how her mind was trailing.

"Mhm," he hummed over his shoulder, flicking her ear with his tail as they emerged in the clearing. "Maybe you simply can't handle fighting—and that's totally okay. I've seen you thrive under just as

intense non-physical situations; that feature alone is why you make a worthy warrior; I've witnessed how easily you can direct a situation to your desired outcome. You're a great warrior, even if you can't take part in close combat."

With that, Cindertalon padded toward Wrenfeather and Thistlestar, who were both listening to Newtsplash and Waspcatcher as they tried to speak at the same time. They fell silent when Cindertalon appeared, and Silvermist caught a worried glance from her uncle before he gave the elder warrior his attention. *Maybe I should take his advice,* she mused after a moment of consideration. His words reassured her, though the fear of being a bad warrior lingered at the back of her mind.

Giving herself a nod, Silvermist made her way across the camp. She hesitated one final time before pushing past the lichen curtain that hid the contents of the medicine den. Inside, she could see Icemint and Rowanspots sitting together. The former seemed to perk up at Silvermist's appearance, while the older medicine cat didn't seem too eager to see her.

"Hey, Silvermist!" Icemint chirped, her eyes wide. "We heard about what happened—nobody got hurt, right?"

"No," the warrior mewed in response, falling still. "Rookshade and Stormrunner really saved my hide, though." Icemint said nothing, though Silvermist could see that she was in awe at the mere mention of Stormrunner.

"Why are you here if you aren't hurt?" Rowanspots demanded, finally stepping forward. If it had been any other cat, Silvermist might have been offended by the tone she took.

"Ah, right. Cindertalon said I should talk to you about something I've been experiencing," Silvermist spoke slowly, trying to figure out how to phrase her words before they left her mouth. Rowanspots tensed visibly while Icemint tilted her head curiously; both mollies were silent, and Silvermist took it as her cue to continue. "It's a lot harder to explain than I expected, but here goes nothing, I guess. I have a really hard time hunting and . . . well, it's even worse with fighting, I guess."

"That's not as uncommon as you think," Rowanspots mewed plainly without a moment of thought. "Cindertalon should know that, of all cats."

"There's more to it," Silvermist mumbled quickly, shuffling her paws as she tried to summon the words. "I just can't figure out how to describe it." Suddenly, the lichen curtain swayed as Rookshade entered the den.

"Even after the coyote was long gone, Silvermist could barely breathe," the black-furred tom explained easily, and Silvermist swore she detected a hint of worry in his voice. "She was shaking like a leaf, too—worse than the rest of us. I wasn't entirely sure she'd make it back to camp on her own."

Silvermist felt strangely defiant at his words and shot him a harsh look. "You'd be shaking too if that thing had nearly eaten you," she spoke, somehow managing to keep her tone casual. "I'm not helpless just because my nerves got the best of me." *Why is he acting like I can't take care of myself?* she wondered. She almost felt angry with him, but when she met his steady amber gaze, it became hard to conjure such feelings.

"I never said you were helpless," Rookshade responded calmly, almost making Silvermist reconsider her words. "You just looked like you'd pass out at any moment, and I was worried."

"Can you describe how you felt?" Rowanspots interrupted, looking unusually interested. "And when did you say this happens? When you hunt and when there's fighting?"

"When there's actual combat, it can happen faster than I realize," Silvermist mewed after a moment. "My body gets this kind of . . . I don't know what it is, but the feeling of it is really— threatening? And it creeps though my legs. Sometimes my chest will get all tight, like I could choke on my own breath, and I get dizzy and everything around me sounds muffled. It . . . today, it almost felt like I wasn't actually in my own body. I can feel it happening when I try to hunt, too, but it's not nearly as bad." After finishing, Silvermist looked down at her paws and shuffled them awkwardly. In a way, she felt like she had just opened up her entire soul for the three cats that sat

with her.

"Do you think she's sick?" Icemint asked after a moment, her eyes round with worry. "You never taught me about something like this, Rowanspots."

"Icemint, get her some thyme leaves in case she's still experiencing shock from the attack," Rowanspots ordered after a few heartbeats of consideration. "I think Cypressleaf from SwiftClan could help—he mentioned Vinestar suffering from similar symptoms."

"I-I'm fine now, Rowanspots, really!" Silvermist quickly insisted. "You don't have to visit another Clan just for this—"

"We have two medicine cats for these kinds of situations," the older medicine cat cut her off swiftly, clearly not willing to budge on her decision. "Do whatever Icemint says; you can leave the medicine den if you feel better, but don't leave the camp. I'll hopefully return with an idea of how to help you."

Without waiting for Silvermist to respond further, Rowanspots hurried out of the medicine den. Icemint had already left to fetch the specific herbs and returned with a few leaves in her teeth. Her eyes were still rounded, though this time she seemed almost apologetic.

"Sometimes Rowan is pretty unpredictable," Icemint mewed after giving Silvermist the herbs. "She's usually so tense around the other cats our age, though she never says why."

Silvermist slowly ate the thyme leaves and met Icemint's gaze. "I can't help feeling like I'm being a nuisance, honestly . . . ."

"No, this is a good thing—if this ever happens in the future, we'll know how to handle it." Then, the molly narrowed her eyes at Rookshade, who continued to hover near Silvermist. "Rook, did you get hurt?"

"I just want to be sure Silvermist is okay," he spoke quickly, but when Silvermist glanced at him, she saw that his previous concern

had faded.

"Well, she's fine—she's in my care, so you can tend to your duties, now."

Rookshade quickly shot Icemint a look before perking his ears innocently. "Oh, but I heard that Stormrunner was looking for you!"

"W-Wait— he was?" Icemint hesitated, glancing worriedly at Silvermist, who was trying to hold back a snort of amusement at how the siblings went back and forth.

"I'm fine, Icemint," she reassured the medicine cat, nodding toward the entrance of the den. Even with the motion, Silvermist couldn't help but wonder if Stormrunner actually wanted to see her. "The thyme is already helping, so don't worry."

Icemint didn't need any more encouragement. By the time Silvermist had finished speaking, she was trotting out of the medicine den, leaving the molly with her brother. Silvermist turned her gaze toward Rookshade, studying him carefully; with Icemint gone, he eyed Silvermist the same way. His amber eyes flickered warily over her pelt, and she hated how her fur burned under his attention.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he finally spoke after an awkward silence engulfed them. "You were pretty shaken up back there."

"I've never been better, seriously," Silvermist quickly reassured him. She found herself holding back a sigh of exasperation as she plastered her signature cheerful expression onto her muzzle. "I can handle myself just fine."

"I know you can, but . . . ." Rookshade kept his eyes trained on Silvermist's form as words seemed to escape him. Silvermist only twitched her ears and rose to her paws before nodding toward the lichen curtain once more to signal that she would be leaving.

"But . . . ?" she urged him half-heartedly, padding toward the den entrance. If she was going to be stuck in camp for the day, she wanted to at least be helpful—Wrenfeather would surely have a

task for her.

"I just can't keep myself from worrying sometimes," Rookshade finished his sentence reluctantly. Silvermist glanced over her shoulder and paused at the curtain that shielded them from the main clearing. "What if Stormrunner and I hadn't been there?"

Silvermist winced at the involuntary shudder she gave. "Let's not think about the *what ifs*," she murmured, turning her head to peek into the camp. "I'm going to see if I can help around the camp, since I'm stuck here until Rowanspots gets back."

Without waiting for a response, Silvermist pushed past the curtain and shoved down the thoughts of her near-death. She could feel Rookshade's presence close on her tail, and even though he was silent, the weight in the air was enough to tell her that he had more to say. Silently, the warrior wished he would hold his tongue, and she was beyond grateful when he seemed to catch the hint. Not far from the medicine den, she spotted Icemint and Stormrunner together—with Dawnstrike, as well. The cream-furred warrior's gaze seemed eerily dark, and Silvermist found herself forcing her own gaze away as she approached Thistlestar and Wrenfeather.

"From now on, all patrols will have extra members," her uncle was meowing. Even though he looked as approachable as ever, she noticed how his tail tip twitched with unease. "Two cats have vanished *and* a coyote nearly killed our warriors—we can't afford more losses with the rogue conflicts."

"Understood," Wrenfeather responded respectfully. The deputy noticed quickly when Silvermist approached them, and turned to face her. "Oh, Silvermist, I'm reworking the patrols of the day. Are you okay to finish yours with Cindertalon and the others?"

"Actually, Rowanspots wants me to stay in the camp until she gets back," Silvermist explained, feeling a bit sheepish. "I was wondering if there was anything I could help with from here?"

"Ah, that's right," Wrenfeather tilted his head a bit. "I nearly forgot that she and Cricketfern left for SwiftClan. I think Icemint took care of the elders' today, but it wouldn't hurt if you checked on

them again. Rookshade, I'd like you and Stormrunner to finish your hunting patrol. You two are some of our best hunters, we could really use you out there."

Silvermist quickly retreated when the deputy started sending orders about. She felt her uncle's gaze burning into her pelt as she approached the elders' den, but kept her own gaze fixated on her destination. *As much as I appreciate the concern, I'd hate to worry more cats,* she thought, trying to force herself to walk with a casual liveliness. Once she was in the elders' den, she realized that most of them were asleep—Vinecrawl and Snailbelly were curled up side-by-side, Lynxtail was splayed out lazily in her own nest, and Daisynose was snoring next to a conscious Mistypool. When she met her grandmother's drowsy green gaze, Silvermist found herself hesitating; the elders clearly didn't need anything from her, and the events of the last several moons had sparked some questions that Silvermist didn't realize she'd ever want to voice.

"Hey, Mistypool," she greeted quietly, surprised at her sudden confidence. "Could I ask you something?"

"It's nice to see you, too, Silvermist," the old molly mewed, her voice deep from a mixture of sleepiness and amusement. "You can ask me anything, dear one. Are you doing okay?"

"I'm doing just fine," Silvermist murmured instinctively, drawing closer to the grey molly. "Did you . . . ever meet my father?"

"No, I can't say I ever did," Mistypool responded without hesitation, her eyes knowing. "Mintwillow was always secretive about his identity, but once you were born, she insisted to Thistlestar and I that neither of you were to meet him."

Silvermist froze at her words, resisting the urge to narrow her eyes. "She . . . said it exactly like that?" she mumbled softly, glancing toward Daisynose's slumbering form.

"Mm . . . yes, that much I'm certain about. Why?" Silvermist returned her gaze to her grandmother, thinking over her words carefully before continuing.

"It's just . . . if she phrased it like that, it's almost as if she knew she would eventually leave." With each word, the silver-point molly searched Mistypool's expression for a hint of revelation—anything to tell her what she might know.

"I don't think so, Silver," Mistypool responded. A hint of sadness was suddenly woven into her voice as she glanced down at her sleeping sister. "Your mother wouldn't leave her family behind without good reason."

Silvermist frowned a bit at her grandmother's words. Though it didn't seem like Mistypool was lying, her words delivered an almost ominous sensation to the young warrior. After taking some time to contemplate, she opened her mouth to press further, only to be interrupted by the rustling of the elders' den entrance. Quickly, Silvermist turned around, stiffening when Cricketfern's head popped into view. *They're back already? Either they're the fastest cats in the forest, or more time has passed than I thought.*

". . . Rowanspots is back," the brown tabby murmured after a painfully awkward silence. "She said she wants to see you in the medicine den."

"R-Right," Silvermist stammered in response. She ducked her head toward Mistypool and quickly left the den. When she started padding toward the medicine den, Cricketfern called to her softly and approached her.

"Silv— er, Silvermist, are you doing okay?" he asked quietly, concern more than evident in his strained voice and round eyes. Silvermist tried to bite back the apology that had been swimming around in her mind for moons when his appearance set off a wave of guilt within her.

"Yeah," the molly responded hesitantly. "At least, I think so. I uh . . . I shouldn't keep Rowanspots waiting. I'm— I'm sorry." With that, Silvermist spun around and rushed to the medicine den. In a strange way, she felt like she was slowly starting to understand Mintwillow's decision to leave; even if she had knowingly brought it on herself, her interactions with her Clanmates were becoming almost too painful and awkward to endure.

Chapter Twenty-One

"Cypressleaf gave us enough goatweed to last a while, but we also need to tend to the new gooseberry plant in case we run out," Rowanspots instructed Icemint as she nudged the bundle of herbs toward Silvermist. The warrior eyed it carefully, noticing how the yellow petals peeked through the leaves used to wrap them up, before obediently consuming it. "We're always welcome to go to him for more, since he said it's best used fresh. Icemint, can you remember what else he said to me?"

"Chamomile and goatweed are best for long-term management," the younger medicine cat recited, though her gaze was locked onto Silvermist's as she spoke, "or when used to counter a potentially shocking event. If we ever run out, or if our stock dries up, gooseberries are a good choice, but he said that Vinestar seemed to build up a tolerance to those. We should use them sparingly, just in case Silvermist ends up being the same. Oh! He also said that we can substitute the treatment with juniper berries or thyme, but those are best used *after* a traumatic incident."

"And since chamomile doesn't thrive well in our territory, our best choices are goatweed and gooseberries," Rowanspots added with a satisfied nod. Silvermist couldn't help feeling a bit overwhelmed by the interaction; the two medicine cats could probably hold the history of the entire Clans in their minds, if they really wanted to.

"Don't the other Clans grow chamomile?" Silvermist spoke up quietly, hoping she wasn't wrong. "Couldn't you ask them for some?"

"We could, but that's even farther than a journey to SwiftClan," Rowanspots responded with a sudden curtness to her tone, though it was much less noticeable than usual. Silvermist had to swallow back her amusement when she realized that the older molly was becoming more accustomed to her own presence in the medicine

den; Rowanspots hardly tensed at her voice anymore, as well. "I doubt Emberflame or Shadowpath would have enough to spare for the trip to be worth it. Since you brought up the other Clans, you reminded me . . . ."

"What is it?" Silvermist asked, tilting her head when Rowanspots turned to face her fully.

"Are you certain you'd like to attend the Gathering tonight?" The brownish-tortoiseshell medicine cat spoke simply, but her amber eyes were serious, and inside them Silvermist could easily see the words she left unspoken.

"Of course, Rowan," she quickly assured. "Talking to the cats of the other Clans and hearing their announcements is actually . . . quite relaxing. It's nice to be reminded that NightClan isn't the center of the universe sometimes, and I can tell you I've never felt so panicked while I'm there." As she uttered the last few words, she remembered how she caught Stormrunner with Badger and Sister Shade, but she quickly decided it was a harmless lie. *That was a one-time occurrence, I'm sure,* she told herself. *They wouldn't be that careless twice.*

"Oh, let her go, Rowanspots," Icemint urged when her mentor didn't respond right away. "I can keep an eye on her while you talk to the other medicine cats. If anything happens, it's not like we won't be right there—and Cypressleaf, too, now that he knows about it."

"Fine, fine," Rowanspots let out a weary sigh and waved her tail in dismissal. "You can tell Thistlestar I'm giving you permission to attend the Gathering if the rain lets up. Go on, now—Icemint and I still have some preparations to make."

Silvermist didn't hesitate as she dipped her head in a farewell to the medicine cats. Quickly, she rose to her paws and exited the den. Almost immediately, Rookshade was at her side, but the tom didn't speak right away. Instead, he walked with her as she approached Thistlestar and Wrenfeather, both of them ignoring the cold drizzle that seeped into their fur and drenched the camp clearing. As the time for the Gathering drew nearer, the rain eased up, and

Silvermist thought she could see the sky peeking through some of the grey clouds in the sky. *We'll be able to go to the Gathering if the rain would just stop for a bit,* she thought with a glance at the melted piles of snow that dotted the edges of the camp.

"Did Rowanspots clear you to attend the Gathering?" Rookshade whispered once they neared the leader and deputy. "I know how much you enjoy talking to Lilypetal and Webheart; it'd be a shame if you missed two Gatherings in a row."

"Yeah, she did," Silvermist responded with a nod. "Now we just need the sky to clear up."

"I heard Snailbelly say that the rain will stop soon." Rookshade turned his head a bit, as if he were glancing toward the elder he mentioned. "I don't know how they can sense these things, but I've learned to trust the elders with their weather predictions."

Silvermist let out an amused hum of acknowledgement as she took the final few steps toward her uncle and Wrenfeather. The two toms sat side by side and, now that she cast her full attention on them, she could hear that they were discussing the same thing as she and Rookshade.

"Silvermist," Thistlestar greeted once he noticed her presence. "And Rookshade. Are you two wanting to join us at the Gathering Stones tonight?"

"Rowanspots already gave me permission," Silvermist mewed, knowing it would have been the next question he asked. Beside her, she could see Rookshade offer a soft nod as an answer. "Have you chosen the rest of the group, already?"

"Mostly," Wrenfeather spoke this time, his gaze drifting across the camp. "Have you seen Stormrunner? He's the last cat we were thinking of bringing, but neither of us have seen him for a while now. Thistlestar said he might have been with you in the medicine den."

Silvermist tensed a bit at the question, but forced herself to relax when she realized the attention had been placed on her. "I haven't

spoken to him today," she mumbled a bit, trying not to guiltily avert her gaze. *I've hardly spoken to him for moons, now,* she added in her mind. "Maybe Rookshade or Dawnstrike saw him somewhere? I was with Icemint and Rowanspots for most of the day, and he never stopped by."

"I think I saw him with Dawnstrike earlier, but I haven't talked to him, either," Rookshade spoke as soon as Silvermist shifted the attention to him. When she glanced at him, she could see him nodding toward the warriors' den and Dawnstrike, who was sitting alone at the entrance. *Strange, usually he hangs out with Stormrunner during the day, too,* she mused.

"Dawnstrike!" Wrenfeather called immediately. "Have you seen Stormrunner recently?"

"I saw him before the rain started," the cream-furred molly called back after letting her gaze flicker carefully between the four cats. "He said he was going to go hunting a while ago. Has he not returned?"

Silvermist frowned at her tone; while seemingly innocent, there was a hint of something else that Dawnstrike wasn't telling them. With a glance at Thistlestar, she could see that her uncle felt the same. The weather had been poor since the early morning—it left a massive window for her brother to be unaccounted for. Immediately, her mind went to the worst possible outcome, and no matter what she tried she couldn't dismiss her growing worries.

"He wasn't scheduled for a hunting patrol," Wrenfeather muttered immediately, turning back toward Thistlestar. "As you've ordered, I haven't allowed any cats outside of the camp without an escort. Dawnstrike should have reported this to me when it happened."

"Get ready to send out a patrol to search for him," Thistlestar ordered sharply, his amber eyes dark with worry. His voice rose with the command, and multiple cats began to creep over as the rain quickly slowed to a stop.

"Thistlestar, it's been raining all day," the deputy responded

slowly. "If he left a trace, it's likely long gone by now."

"I don't care," the white-furred tom lashed his tail, startling Silvermist. "I want Rookshade and Cindertalon in the search party—they're the best hunters in the Clan. If anyone can find him, they can."

"Don't get too worried," Dawnstrike's voice silenced the leader as she approached. The unusual gentleness of her voice immediately sparked suspicion within Silvermist, and the fluffy warrior eyed her warily. "I know, I know—he's your nephew, of course you'd worry, but he can take care of himself."

"I know he can take care of himself," Thistlestar snapped, fixing Dawnstrike with an icy amber gaze. "It doesn't change the fact that, as *leader*, I need to see him return safely. What if he *is* hurt out there?"

"He's not—" Defiance seemed to flash through Dawnstrike's gaze before she swiftly cut herself off. With a glance toward the camp entrance, she added, "You're right, this is dangerous weather to be caught in. I'd like to be part of the search party, if you're taking volunteers. I'm sorry, Thistlestar."

Silvermist flinched at the added apology, still eyeing Dawnstrike suspiciously. It wasn't like her to back down from an argument, much less *apologize* for it. *What is she apologizing for, anyways?* she thought, her skepticism rising the longer she thought. *And since when does she help with the search patrols? She never went looking for Ferrettail more than once or twice.* As Wrenfeather assigned and sent out the patrol—consisting of Rookshade, Cindertalon, Dawnstrike, and Waspcatcher—Silvermist felt her worry deepening. If all of the disappearances were related, then something darker than Sister Shade's rogues might be lurking in their territory. *And if they aren't all connected, then would he have really done such a thing . . . ?*

"Are we still going to the Gathering, now that the rain has stopped?" Newtsplash's voice rang through the camp, her tone thick with worry. Her words made Silvermist painfully aware of the crowd that had formed around Thistlestar and Wrenfeather. "Surely the other Clans would understand if we don't show . . . ."

"I don't think we can leave the camp unguarded after this," Sandfoot mumbled from Dovesong's side. Even though he looked calm, his voice was laced with concern. "I don't know what's happening, but if Stormrunner isn't found, he makes the third Clanmate we've lost. We need to be careful—I don't even know if I can visit Sorrelfrost while it's like this."

He's right, Silvermist thought with a short-lived glance back toward the camp entrance. *And I can't continue to hold back what I know. Even if it's not related, I need to start being the best warrior I can be.* The rest of their Clanmates nodded and voiced their agreement —even Wrenfeather looked uneasy as he gazed at his kin in the crowd. Thistlestar's worry-stricken gaze softened as he stared back at his Clanmates, and when Silvermist caught his gaze, he let out a sigh and moved to speak. *It's now or never, Silvermist,* she told herself, taking a few swift steps toward her uncle.

"Everyone, your concerns are valid—"

"Thistlestar," she interrupted him with a hushed tone, her ears burning under the gazes of her Clanmates now that she had taken their attention. "Can I speak with you for a moment?"

The leader hesitated, taken aback by her request. "Yeah, of course," he murmured after a heartbeat. He raised his voice once more to address their Clanmates, saying, "Excuse us for a moment. I'll address all of your worries shortly," before leading Silvermist away and into the privacy of his den.

With each step toward Thistlestar's den, Silvermist could feel the gazes of her Clanmates boring into her fur. *What can I even say for myself once I tell him everything?* Even though she was worried not only for herself, but for her brother, she knew she had to tell him what she knew about the rogues—even if that information hurt some of her Clanmates in the process.

"What's going on in that head of yours?" Thistlestar asked gently once they were both inside his den. "You know I won't rest until we find your brother, if that's what you're worried about."

"Uncle, I haven't been entirely honest with you—or the rest of

the Clan," Silvermist admitted quickly after taking a deep breath. "I think—" *StarClan, I can't believe I'm saying this out loud!* "—that some of our missing Clanmates might have joined the rogues."

"What do you mean . . . ?" Immediately, Thistlestar's tone hardened, confusion woven noticeably through it. "What reason would you have to think such things?"

"When Stormrunner and I were still apprentices, I overheard Ferrettail and Dawnstrike talking about how they wanted to introduce him to the rogues. A-And a few moons ago, I caught Stormrunner talking to some rogues during the Gathering." Silvermist's words were suddenly so rushed that they jumbled together toward the end. In front of her, Thistlestar stiffened so much that she worried he had frozen in place, but she didn't stop telling him what she knew. Instead, she looked at her paws and kept speaking. "When Ferrettail went missing and we inspected the strange tracks he left, I saw that the snow from a nearby tree's branches had been disturbed. It's possible he climbed the tree and snuck away like that—"

"Why have you waited until now to tell me this?" Thistlestar demanded. Even though he managed to keep his voice quiet, Silvermist didn't have to look at him to see that he was *furious*. "Do you understand the position this puts me in? Do you know how this makes *you* look, Silvermist?"

Silvermist bristled defensively despite knowing he was right. "Every time I caught him, Stormrunner told me to just trust him. I thought he knew what he was doing, I'm sorry. If I had known this would happen, I would have come to you immediately." Part of her wished she could tell him about the Place of No Stars, or the strange, distorted voice she had heard at Starfalls, but that StarClan cat had told her to keep quiet. As much as she wanted to doubt the strange cat's orders, deep down, she felt strangely compelled to obey them.

"I just wish you had told me sooner," Thistlestar said with a sigh as his anger quickly subsided. "Do you know the names of the rogues he made contact with? Maybe if Cindertalon knew them, we could track them down—"

"It was Sister Shade and her followers," Silvermist cut her uncle off before he had a chance to remain hopeful. *Absent is a prime example of what could happen to someone who tries to leave her leadership,* she told herself darkly. *If he really did join them, then we may never see him again.* "But . . . Thistlestar, there was something else, now that I think about it."

Thistlestar had tensed at the revelation that Stormrunner had been involved with the same rogues that lurked menacingly through their territory. "What else could possibly go wrong?" he muttered apprehensively.

"When I caught Stormrunner with Shade, she tried to recruit me, as well," Silvermist spoke more slowly than before, eyeing her uncle as she recalled what had happened. "After I turned her down, she revealed that they've been searching for Mintwillow. She said she stole something from them."

"W-What?" Thistlestar stuttered, his eyes widening. "What did you tell them?"

"I told them that I don't know any cat named Mintwillow. Why would they be searching for her?" Silvermist queried, not sure of her own feelings now that she had confessed. "Do you know what she could have stolen from them?"

"I need to explain the situation to the Clan," Thistlestar mumbled with a weary sigh. For once, Silvermist couldn't tell if he had ignored her question or simply didn't register the words he heard. "Come with me."

Without waiting for her response, Thistlestar left the den with his head held high. Silvermist swallowed back her questions and quickly followed after him, noticing how the search party had returned—without Stormrunner. Dawnstrike sat at the far edge of the clearing, while Rookshade and Cindertalon had joined Icemint outside of the medicine den. Waspcatcher sat with Cricketfern and their parents, the four of them whispering worriedly to each other.

"Everyone," Thistlestar called, his voice steady and confident. "I've come to the conclusion that we cannot leave our camp as

unguarded as we do for Gatherings for the time being. Sister Shade's band of rogues has turned out to be more of a problem than I initially expected, and from this moment on, we all need to be on high alert."

Immediately, worried chatter broke out among the gathered cats. Silvermist shuffled her paws and did her best to stand behind Thistlestar to keep the attention off of her, but she could still feel her fur burn as a few gazes fell to her as her Clanmates threw questions toward them.

". . . that being said, I've also realized that I must come clean to the other Clan leaders and explain what has been happening here. Wrenfeather, I'd like you to stay and guard the camp while I take a small group of cats to the Gathering. Rowanspots, I think you should accompany me."

"Of course, sir," Wrenfeather nodded quickly with a glance at his family. "Which cats will you be taking with you?"

"I think the most approachable warriors would be best to bring, considering the news I'll be revealing," Thistlestar continued with a quick glance around. "Dovesong, you're admired throughout the Clans—Cricketfern has already obtained a similar reputation, too. I'd like for both of you to come along. Silvermist, I know you're friendly with the cats of other Clans, as well. Everyone else, stay here and stay observant. Wrenfeather, absolutely *nobody* is to leave the camp until we return."

"Understood. How soon will you be leaving?" Wrenfeather glanced up at the sky, and for the first time, Silvermist realized that the clouds had cleared just enough for the barely-rising moon to be seen.

"We'll need to go right away." Thistlestar turned and locked his gaze to Silvermist's for a moment before heading toward the camp entrance. "Icemint, stay behind in case there's an emergency while we're gone. I'll give everyone a moment to prepare, but don't take long."

Within moments, Dovesong was at Thistlestar's side near the

woven bramble entrance. Silvermist could see Cricketfern offering affectionate farewells to his family, as if it was the last time they'd see one another. *How did things get so bad so quickly?* she wondered, turning to find Rookshade in the crowd. As she found and approached him, she couldn't help but feel like this could have been avoided if she had gone to her uncle sooner.

"What exactly did you tell him in there?" Icemint asked from Rookshade's side, her eyes wide. "Thistlestar hasn't looked so serious for a long time!"

"I'm sure he'll tell the Clan when the time is right," Silvermist found herself responding without thinking. *Surely there was a reason he didn't elaborate yet.* "I just came to say goodbye to Rookshade; I don't really have time to explain."

"Are you sure you can go to the Gathering when it's like this?" Rookshade murmured and fixed an intent gaze on Silvermist. "Maybe you should tell Thistlestar that you can't . . . ."

"No, I want to," she quickly shook her head in response. "If I stay here, I'll just be tempted to find Stormrunner myself and demand answers. Besides, I'd like to see how RushClan is faring with Ripplestar as their leader."

"Well, be safe." Suddenly, Rookshade leaned forward and brushed his muzzle against Silvermist's. The action took her by surprise, and she stiffened instinctively. "Make sure you get Rowanspots' attention if things feel off."

"Y-Yeah, of course," Silvermist mumbled before quickly bounding toward Thistlestar and the others. Before long, Rowanspots joined them, and the small group took off toward the Gathering Stones.

Silvermist hardly noticed the occasional piles of snow they tore through, or how the melting substance burned her toes each time they touched it. She barely registered the overwhelming scents of the other four Clans until they were padding into the moonlit clearing. Their late arrival demanded the attention of everyone else; she could feel the gazes off all the other Clans burning into her and

quickly realized just how small they seemed compared to the previous moons.

Thistlestar wasted no time bounding up the Tallrock to sit by the other leaders. Likewise, Rowanspots rushed to sit with the other medicine cats, and Silvermist took it as her cue to swiftly find a spot. Atop the Tallrock, the other leaders eyed Thistlestar with visibly uncertainty. Much to Silvermist's gratitude, none of them made a move to question him yet. In the crowd of RushClan cats, she easily picked out the familiar light brown pelt of Lilypetal, and she had started moving to greet her when she heard the molly call to Cricketfern.

"Cricketfern, over here!" she called as Webheart sat next to her. "Waspcatcher didn't come tonight?"

"Ah, no, we had to keep the group smaller tonight," Cricketfern chirped back as he trotted past Silvermist and up to the RushClan molly. *Maybe I should just sit with Dovesong tonight,* Silvermist thought as she chose a spot near her Clanmate.

"Now that everyone is here, I'd love to start us off," Lichenstar purred once the air lost its tension. "We don't have much news to announce, but MistClan is proud to say that Hickoryseed's kits have all become apprentices—please give a warm welcome to Acornpaw, Leafpaw, and Oakpaw at the apprentices' area, and to Owlpaw with the medicine cats! Things are good, and we look forward to the hunts that newleaf will bring."

The fluffy ginger molly motioned to her Clanmates with her tail as the clearing erupted into congratulatory cheers. Then, Lichenstar stepped back and nodded to Buzzardstar, who gratefully raised her head to speak.

"BlazeClan is also faring well with the end of leafbare," she called out with a curious glance toward Thistlestar. "Amberlight has given birth to three little kits—Blizzardkit, Duskkit, and Lightkit—and will likely return to her deputy duties shortly before they reach the age of apprenticeship. We've also caught faint traces of rogues in our territory. It's not likely to be a threat to anyone, but I wanted to make sure I warned the other Clans in case they detect the same

scents. Ripplestar, your warriors look well." Twitching her whiskers with amusement, Buzzardstar beckoned to Ripplestar with her head. The new RushClan leader let out a soft chuckle before padding forward, her sleek pelt shimmering in the moonlight.

"RushClan is doing very well," she purred proudly with a glance at her warriors. "The river has started to thaw *much* earlier than expected, and my Clanmates have been eager to fill their bellies with fish once again. For once, we don't have any new announcements to make, though I'm glad to hear that the rest of you are thriving so far."

Silvermist turned to steal another glance at the RushClan cats and realized that Buzzardstar was right—at the lower, less-crowded perch where the deputies usually rested, she could see Troutslip's dark grey fur shining the same way that Ripplestar's did. All of her warriors bore the same healthy fur, aside from Pikesplash, whose fur still looked healthy despite being duller than the others. Silvermist was so busy admiring some of them that she hardly noticed when Lilypetal broke away from her Clanmates and approached with Cricketfern trailing after her.

"Busy admiring Cricketfern?" Lilypetal's teasing whisper shook the NightClan warrior's attention back to her immediate surroundings. Immediately, Silvermist bristled with embarrassment—Cricketfern had been almost directly in her line of sight when she had started to inspect the RushClan cats.

"Sorry, Silvermist," Cricketfern murmured when he caught up to Lilypetal. "I tried telling her to let you have some space—"

"No, it's okay," the words tumbled out of Silvermist's mouth before he could finish. "The company is nice to have, actually." She offered him a welcoming nod of her head while Lilypetal settled next to her. Silvermist's gaze rested on Cricketfern for a few moments longer before Vinestar's voice demanded their silence and attention once more.

"We, like the rest of you, are doing well," Vinestar announced happily. "The early thaws have raised the waters of some of the swampy areas, so NightClan and MistClan warriors should be

careful when patrolling the borders. Sorrelfrost also had her kits only sunrises ago—Peachkit, Furzekit, and Cherrykit! As the leader of SwiftClan, I'd love to extend an invitation for Sandfoot to visit . . . ?" Suddenly, the pale grey molly turned to Thistlestar, her words trailing off in an obvious invitation for him to speak.

"Ah, yes," Thistlestar responded slowly. Clearly, he was still pondering over how to bring up the issues of NightClan. "I'll be sure to send him with an escort when it's possible."

"An escort . . . ? When it's possible?" Vinestar echoed, taken aback. "Did something happen?"

"Yes, it's not like you to bring so few warriors," Buzzardstar chimed in with a thoughtful glance down at Silvermist, Cricketfern, and Dovesong. "And don't think we didn't notice Wrenfeather's absence, as well."

Thistlestar cleared his throat deliberately when the rest of the Clans' attention strayed toward Silvermist and her Clanmates. "I'm afraid I haven't been entirely honest with you all," he started slowly, offering a respectful yet embarrassed bow of his head. "We've lost some warriors recently, and while we aren't sure of their whereabouts, I recently discovered that there's reason to believe a certain group of rogues is involved. It's long past time to warn the rest of you, though I don't believe that they'd make targets out of the rest of you after so long."

"Who's gone missing?" Lichenstar asked with a shocked gasp. "How long has it been?!"

"Nearly five moons ago, Mintwillow went missing during an attack on one of our hunting patrols." Thistlestar glanced up at the sky as a few clouds drifted into sight. Silvermist held back a frown as she watched them linger dangerously close to the moon. "Ferrettail vanished over a moon ago now—almost two, and Stormrunner is missing as of today."

"Thistlestar . . . ." Silvermist couldn't even tell which of the leaders let out the sympathetic murmur as they glanced at one another, their astonishment written plainly on their faces. Out of

the corner of her eye, she saw Lilypetal shoot her a worried glance, but she was careful not to seem out of sorts. *Thistlestar brought us along because of how friendly we are with the other Clans,* she reminded herself firmly. *I can't let him down again.*

Then, the clearing darkened as stormy clouds hid moon from sight. An ice-cold drizzle quickly rained down on the Clans, seeping into Silvermist's fur and chilling her to the bone. Thistlestar shot an urgent glance at Rowanspots before the two of them quickly retreated to the edges of the clearing without a word of notice to the other leaders or medicine cats. Silvermist merely offered Lilypetal a nod before rushing off after them; Cricketfern was close behind her and Dovesong raced just ahead of her. *Was that a message from StarClan?* she fretted when her uncle set a swift pace and led them toward their camp. *They've always said that the clouds covering the moon is an omen—what could be awaiting us at the camp?*

Once they reached their camp, Silvermist perked her ears and tried to listen for sounds of panic or distress. The forest was quiet aside from the sound of the rain, and she couldn't make out any kind of fear-scent; judging by the looks Thistlestar and Rowanspots exchanged, they couldn't detect anything, either. Briskly, they were led into the camp, where Wrenfeather rested dutifully beneath an overhanging root.

"Wrenfeather, I need an attendance check immediately," Thistlestar ordered, his head turning as he scanned the camp. Everyone else seemed to have returned to their nests already, but at their leader's urgent voice, they slowly emerged out of the dens.

"Alright, but why so stressed?" Wrenfeather asked as he walked to meet the returning cats in the center of the clearing. "I've been on watch for the entire night, nobody has left."

"I'll explain everything to the senior warriors later. Please—I see Newtsplash, Sandfoot, Cindertalon, and Waspcatcher have come out. What about Falconwing, Rookshade, and Dawnstrike? And Icemint, or the elders?" Thistlestar bobbed his tail with the first four names he called as he pointed them out. Before Wrenfeather could respond, Dovesong had already rushed to check the elders' den.

"Rookshade and Falconwing were visiting Icemint in the medicine den," the deputy explained calmly while his sister vanished into the den. "Dawnstrike said she had a bellyache from all the worrying and went to ask for a treatment for it."

"The elders are all sleeping," Dovesong called as she poked her head back into the main clearing. "They're all fine."

"We're here, too," Falconwing spoke up as he exited the medicine den with his siblings close behind him. Silvermist caught a worried glance from Rookshade and sent a questioning look in return.

"What about Dawnstrike?" Thistlestar pressed, letting his stare fall to Icemint as she drew near with her brothers.

"Dawnstrike never came to the medicine den," Icemint mewed with a frown. "Rookshade and Falconwing were with me almost the entire time, and none of us even saw her."

"Fox-dung," Thistlestar cursed loudly before rushing to check the warriors' den. "The den is empty. She's gone."

"That's impossible," Wrenfeather muttered, shaking his head. "I was watching the camp entrance the entire time, and I didn't see her leave. The secret entrance was patched up moons ago, and it was literally inside the main tunnel—there's no way she could have left without me seeing her."

"Hold on," Cindertalon spoke up for the first time since they had all returned. "Thistlestar, I understand that our Clanmates have gone missing, but it feels like there's more to it than just that. Is there something we need to know? Everything is fine until someone wanders off on their own." Silvermist swallowed thickly at the question. Her old mentor was right; on top of her uncle's urgency, it would be strange for their Clanmates to only vanish when they're alone. She wasn't sure why Thistlestar kept trying to explain bits and pieces at a time when she had told him everything she could before the Gathering, but it was clear he couldn't leave things as they were.

When he saw that he wouldn't be able to ease the situation

without explaining, Thistlestar let out a low sigh. "There's reason to believe that Stormrunner, Dawnstrike, and Ferrettail were involved with the same band of rogues that's been attacking our patrols and lurking in our territory. Silvermist came to me with the information earlier, and though she didn't say it, I believe they went as far as manipulating her into thinking they were doing it for the good of the Clan. I know that when Ferrettail went missing, I told you to trust your Clanmates, but now that both Stormrunner *and* Dawnstrike have vanished in only one day, I'm afraid we'll need to watch each other more closely than ever. Nobody leaves the camp without at least one partner until we can find out why these rogues are stirring up trouble and stealing our Clanmates."

Despite the fact that Silvermist had told him what they *claimed* to be after, she found herself agreeing with her uncle. It was hard to believe that all of this was because of Mintwillow's actions, and unless her mother reappeared unannounced to explain everything, she doubted she'd get more answers unless she dug them up herself. *Stormrunner wouldn't just leave like that, either,* Silvermist told herself. *Ferrettail and Dawnstrike, sure. Mintwillow? Definitely. But not my brother.* Even though they had countless disagreements, she still felt like he wouldn't have done something so serious without good reason.

a/n ;; And just like that, we've lost a pov character! pog?

Chapter Twenty-Two

"I'll go tell Wrenfeather how the patrol went," Falconwing offered as Silvermist, Newtsplash, and Waspcatcher entered the camp with him. "He probably doesn't need all of us to report back, right?"

"Waspcatcher and I might as well go with you," Newtsplash chirped without a moment of thought. "Wren likes to hear from several cats on the patrols lately; he's been so attentive ever since Dawnstrike vanished on his watch. I think he feels guilty for it." There was a hint of sympathy interwoven in her voice as the molly glanced at her mate across the camp, and Silvermist couldn't help but feel the same.

"Oh, alright, then," Falconwing mumbled. "That makes sense, especially with how often Thistlestar and Rowanspots meet in private now. Are you coming, too, Silvermist?"

"No, you go on ahead," Silvermist instinctively responded, dipping her head to her denmates. "I want to stop by the medicine den to chat with Icemint—I'll be sure to report to Wrenfeather later!"

She waited as her Clanmates all shrugged and padded away without a second glance. Once they were far enough away—and after making sure Wrenfeather's attention was fastened on them—Silvermist *slowly* backed toward the bramble tunnel and wove her way through it. The moment she emerged back into the blossoming forest, she let out a soft sigh of relief and padded deeper into the NightClan territory.

Even though two moons had passed since Stormrunner and Dawnstrike had disappeared, Thistlestar and Wrenfeather refused to ease up on the new schedules. No cat was permitted outside of the camp without at least one partner; some cats, like herself and Falconwing, were assigned to more border patrols than the rest due to their larger frames. Thistlestar insisted that since they weren't

great hunters to begin with, it was fair, but Silvermist suspected that they wanted to seem strong in case another Clan's patrol met theirs.

While *she* was being exhausted by the constant border patrols, the stealthier cats like Rookshade and Cindertalon were often sent out in pairs to monitor the territory. The small surveillance groups often served as additional hunting patrols; Silvermist felt strangely grateful for how full the fresh-kill pile had been, despite everything. And, ignoring the circumstances that preceded it all, she was grateful for the peace that came with the additional security. Not only had the attacks on their patrols ceased, but *nobody* had reported rogue-scent in the territory since the last disappearance.

As appreciative as she was, however, Silvermist could feel a distant bud of worry festering inside of her. The treatments of goatweed and gooseberries had successfully stopped her occasional episodes of panic, but they did nothing to help how much she fretted over Stormrunner. Even now, moons later, she pushed herself to search for traces of him in between patrols.

"Fancy meeting you here." Rookshade's friendly, teasing voice took Silvermist by surprise as he emerged from the undergrowth behind her.

"I thought Wrenfeather didn't allow anyone to leave without a partner," Silvermist mumbled quickly after recovering the slight shock of his presence.

"I could say the same to you," the black-furred warrior continued to tease her for a moment before growing stern. "I covered for you this time, but next time you sneak out of the camp, you should really make sure nobody's watching."

"What are you talking about?" Silvermist glanced around Rookshade and toward the camp.

"Sandfoot saw you leave." Rookshade took a few pawsteps closer and let his gaze travel along the wall of trees and undergrowth that surrounded them. "He was going to come after you, but I said that you and I were going hunting."

After eyeing her friend once more, Silvermist turned and kept walking along her path. ". . . I'm a terrible hunter. Everyone knows that," she commented once a few heartbeats had passed. This time, she kept her own gaze trained on the more distant trees, looking for anything that could indicate her brother's presence.

"And?" Rookshade didn't question her actions as he shrugged his shoulders. Instead, he fell into step beside her and lazily met her pace.

"What if they get the wrong idea?" Silvermist muttered with an exasperated roll of her eyes. *No cat would believe I'm just casually going out to hunt,* she thought with a short-lived glance at Rookshade again.

"So what if they do?" Rookshade countered, his voice hardening as he spoke. "Would you rather have them know that you're actually sneaking out to look for Stormrunner?"

Immediately, Silvermist bristled at his words. "Whatever," she grumbled, forcing her fur to lie flat. "Are you here to bring me back? You know you didn't have to follow me out here."

"StarClan, sometimes I wonder how you were cunning enough to send Shade and her partner out of our territory," Rookshade muttered with playful exasperation, gently bumping into Silvermist with his shoulder. "I wouldn't have lied for you if I didn't want to help, mouse-brain. I've seen how you keep one eye on the forest during your patrols, but I also know that nothing I say could make you stop searching for him. I *can*, however, do my best to make it easier for you."

Silvermist only stopped and stared at Rookshade for a few moments; he stopped and stared right back until, finally, she started walking again. They continued together in silence, each of them straying away every so often to inspect a thicket of brambles or patch of mud. The only thing that could be heard was the crunching of fresh undergrowth beneath their paws as they traveled through the territory.

No matter where she looked, Silvermist couldn't find a trace of

Stormrunner—or any other rogues. Then, she remembered how some of the ambushes were launched from the trees and how she was certain that Ferrettail had snuck away using the same trick. Silvermist cast her gaze upward toward the overhanging branches in search of any broken limbs or disrupted greenery.

"You know, we ought to be careful," Rookshade murmured softly, pulling her attention toward him. "Newtsplash said that they detected stale traces of coyote at the edges of the forest."

"We could be more careful if we weren't making needless conversation," Silvermist countered easily, tilting her head at him.

"You're not wrong." Rookshade glanced at the surrounding trees. "Still, it could be dangerous, especially if you're too caught up in your search. I couldn't call myself a good friend if I let you mope about like this when there's a potential threat out there."

". . . half of my family is missing, Rookshade. I might be *moping,* but it's not for no reason." At his words, Silvermist narrowed her eyes, momentarily forgetting about her mission to find a hint of her brother's presence.

Rookshade sucked his air in through his teeth and sent a meaningful glance back in her direction. "Right, sorry. I forgot that I know *nothing* about losing a family member."

Silvermist opened her mouth for a retort only to find she had none. *That's different, and he knows it,* she thought as she met his smug, matter-of-fact expression. When Rookshade said nothing else, and Silvermist failed to find an appropriate response, she turned her gaze back ahead of her and padded through the forest once again. She turned on her path when she realized that they were nearing the path of the border patrols; it wouldn't be necessary to search that far, given how often she found herself assigned to them.

Now they traveled in the general direction of the camp. It was one of the few places Silvermist hadn't searched yet, and she wasn't entirely familiar with this part of the territory, though she knew their camp wasn't far off. Eventually she spotted a clearing ahead of them, and when she emerged from the undergrowth, Silvermist

almost found herself distracted by what she saw. In the center of the clearing was a large log covered in a thick layer of moss and ivy, and fresh flowers were already starting to bloom around it. Somehow, she had never seen this clearing in particular, though it felt vaguely familiar to her.

"What, you've never been here before?" Rookshade asked when he realized where her attention had fallen. Silvermist looked over to see his eyes trailing over the scenery, looking wholly unimpressed.

"I don't think I have," she murmured slowly, pulling her gaze away from the tom. "When he realized how bad I am at hunting, Wrenfeather stopped putting me on those patrols."

Rookshade didn't say anything for a few heartbeats. When he did speak, it sounded thoughtful. "You know, what if I trained you how to hunt now that Rowanspots found a way to keep your anxiety at bay?"

"I'm a lost cause, Rook," Silvermist scoffed playfully before turning to meet his gaze more seriously. "I don't think you could help much."

"Don't tell me you've forgotten that I'm one of the best hunters in the Clan!" Rookshade shot back, his amber eyes narrowing with mock disbelief. "I'm only ever outdone by my father."

"Yeah, and *he* was my mentor!" Silvermist snorted, rolling her eyes a bit. "Even he gave up a long time ago—" A twig snapped somewhere further into the forest, interrupting her speech. Swiveling her ears to try and pinpoint the sound, she whispered, "Did you hear something?"

"No," the black-furred tom responded quickly, his amusement giving way to concern. "We've been gone for a while, you know. Maybe we should get back to camp now—after we find some prey to bring back, of course."

"I swear I heard a twig break somewhere—"

"Silv, you're getting obsessed," Rookshade frowned and stepped

toward her. "You can't fret over answers you won't be able to find. Besides, you were the one who said you didn't want our Clanmates getting the wrong idea. If we stay out much longer, that's exactly what they'll do."

"Fine," Silvermist gave in, casting her gaze away from her friend. "I can't promise I'll catch anything, though."

Neither of them uttered another word before splitting up to hunt —or *attempt* to hunt. Silvermist wandered a short ways away from the clearing, her mouth parted and ears perked in search of prey-scent or noises, though she couldn't detect anything.

A few tail-lengths away, she spotted something small and brown on the forest floor. Cautiously, Silvermist crouched and approached it, not sure what it might be. If it were live prey, surely she would have caught its scent; perhaps it was a lost kit, though she was certain she'd have smelled that, too. Once she got close enough, she realized that it was not one, but two freshly-killed and rather plump voles.

What in the name of StarClan . . . ? she wondered as she crept toward the small figures. Slowly, Silvermist leaned forward and sniffed at them, only to find that any prey-scent had been covered up by a minty-herb scent. The voles had clearly been set on the ground purposefully, their bodies lined neatly side-by-side, though there were no pawprints nor any scent from the culprit. Almost instinctively, she glanced upwards to inspect the forest canopy just as Rookshade padded into sight with a squirrel and a finch.

"Just as I thought," he mumbled quietly around the prey that hung from his jaws. "See, I told you you'd be better now that you've had Rowanspots' help!"

"Actually—" Silvermist started, glancing back down at the voles.

"No need to get humble, Silv," Rookshade let out a purr of laughter before she could speak. "Come on, let's get back to camp."

"Sure . . . ." Silvermist leaned down and inspected the voles one final time. Once she decided that there was nothing truly amiss

about them—aside from the obvious—she picked them up and followed Rookshade back to the camp.

When they returned, Silvermist realized how strangely empty the camp still felt. Before, she would have seen Stormrunner, Ferrettail, or Dawnstrike mingling with their Clanmates—or huddled together. She even found herself missing Mintwillow's presence.

As Silvermist deposited her prey on the fresh-kill pile with Rookshade, she let her gaze wander. Most cats were either in their dens or on a patrol—the only ones in the clearing with them were Sandfoot, Wrenfeather, Rowanspots, and Thistlestar. The medicine cat and their leader murmured under their breath to one another, their faces stony, while Sandfoot's pleading voice traveled gently over the air.

"Wrenfeather, you know I'll be careful," the pale orange tom mewed. "I haven't even met my kits yet, even though Vinestar invited me to visit! Besides, we haven't found traces of rogue activity in ages."

"It could still be dangerous," Wrenfeather responded with a stern tone. "Anyone who's not scheduled for a patrol is probably too exhausted for a trip to SwiftClan; we just can't afford it. I'm sorry."

"Hold on a moment," Rowanspots mewed, perking up in her spot next to Thistlestar. "Why don't I have him escort me to SwiftClan? I need to get some more goatweed, and I want Icemint to get used to the idea of being the only medicine cat around."

Wrenfeather turned at the molly's voice and held her stare for a few heartbeats before nodding. "Alright, sure. Just be careful and hurry back; Daisynose's wheezing has been getting worse, and Vinecrawl has been complaining about a rather persistent bellyache —to *me* of all cats."

"Well, why didn't you tell me?" Rowanspots asked. Though her expression remained neutral, her whiskers twitched with amusement. "Tell Icemint, she'll take good care of them. Come along, Sandfoot."

"I've already heard!" Icemint called, poking her head out of the medicine den. "I'll treat them right away, though I could use some help carrying the herbs to the elders' den."

"Right, then," Wrenfeather mumbled as Rowanspots and Sandfoot left. "Silvermist, would you help Icemint? Rookshade, make sure the other members of your next hunting patrol are ready —it's nearly time."

At that, the deputy padded over to take what was previously the elder medicine cat's spot next to Thistlestar. Rookshade nudged Silvermist's shoulder before trotting to the warriors' den to gather his patrol, while Silvermist watched the bramble tunnel for a few moments. *Eventually, that'll be Waspcatcher with Lilypetal, won't it?* she mused to herself before making her way to the medicine den.

Icemint had already retreated into the depths of the den, and Silvermist could hear her rummaging about in the herb storage. When the grey-and-white molly came back into sight, she had a mouthful of various herbs that Silvermist didn't recognize. She carried them to the warrior and set them down at her paws briefly before speaking.

"Could you help me carry these to the elders' den? I don't want them more mixed up than they already are. The chervil root is for Vinecrawl, and the coltsfoot is for Daisynose."

Silvermist glanced down at the herbs and nodded before picking up the bundle that looked suspiciously like dandelions, and then she padded with Icemint to the elders' den. Before they even entered the den, she could hear Daisynose's labored wheezing as the elders chatted to one another. Icemint immediately took the root she carried to Vinecrawl, who looked more than relieved to see the medicine cat.

"Is that for my bellyache?" she rasped gratefully before following Icemint's instructions to eat the portion she was given. "You're a blessing from StarClan themselves, Icemint. Thank you."

"That'll teach you not to eat so much!" Snailbelly taunted playfully. Beside him, Lynxtail let out a few wheezes of laughter.

"Silvermist has some coltsfoot for you, Daisynose," Icemint murmured after letting out an amused purr. "If the issues persist—for either of you—send someone to fetch me and we'll try some juniper berries."

Silvermist gave the flowery herb to her great aunt, who quickly took the plant and consumed it. Mistypool sat at her side and soothingly ran her tail down her sister's back, her usually gentle green eyes dark with concern. Wordlessly, and rather suddenly, Icemint tapped Silvermist's shoulder with her tail and motioned the warrior to follow her back into the main clearing.

"I suppose it was a tad cramped in there, wasn't it?" Silvermist mused aloud after following the molly out.

"It was," Icemint nodded, though she both looked and sounded like there was something else threatening to spill its way into the air. The grey-and-white molly opened her mouth, only to close it once again and shake her head slightly.

Somehow, Silvermist knew exactly what the medicine cat was trying to say—she hadn't missed the worried glances shot in her direction, not unlike Rookshade's fretting earlier in the day. *She misses Stormrunner, too, I'm sure,* she thought as she remembered the crush Icemint had formed for her brother. It wasn't just that, though; there was a hint of frustration in the air between them, and she couldn't quite place why.

"So . . . how do you think Sandfoot's kits are doing?" Silvermist said and glanced over at the camp entrance, where Rookshade was about to leave with Cindertalon, Dovesong, and Newtsplash. "He seemed excited to finally meet them."

"He sure was," Icemint mewed back, sounding as awkward as Silvermist felt. "Rowanspots and I are hoping that one of them takes an interest in the role of a medicine cat, since Cypressleaf still needs someone to succeed him. You know, Silvermist, I—" She broke off mid-sentence, her gaze darting away before her words could be spoken.

"What is it?" the silver-point warrior tilted her head. Perhaps she

was finally going to bring up Stormrunner.

Icemint lowered her voice a bit, slowly returning her gaze to Silvermist's. "I know you weren't close with Mistypool and her sister, but I think you should . . . well, Daisynose is . . . I mean, Rowanspots and I think that—er . . . ." Each time, the medicine cat trailed off, her eyes darting around as she failed to find the words to express herself. Even so, it didn't take much for Silvermist to realize what she meant.

"Her time to join StarClan is nearing, isn't it?" she murmured with a frown. With a glance back at the elders' den, Silvermist added, "It looked like Mistypool knew, too. Have you told Thistlestar?"

"I was actually hoping that you could talk to him about it," Icemint admitted sheepishly. "I saw how much you comforted each other when Stormrunner went missing, even if it wasn't always direct. It might be easier to hear coming from you."

Silvermist resisted the urge to frown as she glanced across the clearing. Thistlestar sat in the same spot as before, with Wrenfeather still at his side. The toms seemed to be drawing out an idle conversation, so it would be easy enough to interrupt, but how would she break the news to her uncle? This was the last thing she expected Icemint to get tongue-tied over.

"Alright, sure, I'll talk to him," she decided after a moment. "Thank you for telling me, Icemint."

Icemint only nodded in response. As Silvermist made her way toward Thistlestar, she couldn't help but feel like the molly still hadn't said what was on her mind, but she knew better than to push her to speak on it.

Upon approaching the leader and deputy, she realized that they were talking about the rogues, and the lack of activity in the forest. *This is nowhere near as casual as I hoped,* Silvermist thought with an inward grimace.

"We need to be as prepared as possible," Thistlestar was saying,

his tail swiping over the loose dust of the clearing floor. "Even if we haven't seen a sign of their scheming, I can't shake the feeling that something is coming—especially not with what Rowanspots told me."

"Thistlestar, I'm sorry to interrupt," Silvermist spoke up before she could hear more of their private discussion. "Do you have a moment? There's something I'd like to talk to you about."

The white-furred tom was visibly wary of her request, but only for a split moment. Silvermist watched silently as he nodded toward Wrenfeather, who returned the gesture and took his leave. Then, Thistlestar waved to the spot next to him with his tail, his eyes trained on Silvermist while she sat down. *I can't blame him for being so cautious,* she thought as a flash of guilt passed through her. The last time she'd asked to speak privately with him hadn't left a pleasant memory, and she briefly thought of the day that Stormrunner and Dawnstrike had gone missing.

"I just hope you're not about to reveal even more hidden secrets about our Clanmates," Thistlestar murmured, sounding half-amused and half-sarcastic as he gazed expectantly at Silvermist.

"It's nothing like that, uncle," Silvermist forced a light-hearted purr before glancing toward the elders' den. *Just say it and get it over with, Silvermist.* "It's about Daisynose. It seems like her wheezing is getting worse, and the medicine cats think that she may not have much time left."

The grey-speckled tom seemed to frown and follow his niece's gaze. "I see. Newleaf is usually so promising for us, but this time, we only seem to be facing more hardships. While I can't say I'm surprised, I appreciate having the time to prepare myself. I'll be okay, in the end; we all will." He let out a weary sigh and turned his head toward the sun, his amber eyes growing distant. "Is that the only thing on your mind? You rarely call me *uncle* unless there's something bigger bothering you, Silv."

Silvermist turned her gaze back toward Thistlestar, frowning a bit herself. He always seemed to have a way of knowing just how troubled she was, and she found herself asking a question she didn't

even know she had. "Has our family . . . always been this way? I mean, I've heard . . . *things* that contradict what it felt like in the nursery, and for so long now it's felt—"

"Damaged?" Thistlestar lowered his muzzle to meet her eyes again, and this time, he looked sympathetic. "I'm sure you've probably heard Dawnstrike's version of things. Despite what she says, it's not always been so bad. My mother could see what was happening to us as soon as Mintwillow met the rogues, though. She urged me to look after you both, even before you'd been born."

"I was going to say *distant*, but that damaged fits, too," Silvermist muttered before accidentally letting a bitter laugh slip out. "Mistypool never outright said it, but it feels like she knows so much more than she lets on."

"Silvermist, it won't be like this forever." Thistlestar's voice was more comforting than before, and his words were spoken with steady determination. "When Daisynose passes, and eventually, my own mother, I'll be okay. And even if Mintwillow and Stormrunner don't come back, *we* will be okay. Maybe not after a few days, maybe not even after a few moons, but eventually, we'll heal together."

At first, Silvermist fell silent as she contemplated his words. Then, she let out a soft sigh and glanced around the clearing. "Thank you, uncle," she murmured quietly. "I actually really needed to hear that."

"Of course. It's not hard for me to notice when you're out of sorts; I know I don't have to remind you that I practically raised you, Silv." Thistlestar paused and drew his tail reassuringly over Silvermist's shoulders. "Just . . . don't shut your Clanmates out for too long, okay? Everybody is here for you."

As he spoke, Cricketfern emerged from the warriors' den with Waspcatcher at his side. Silvermist caught his eye faster than she had anticipated, and guilt speared its way through her body once again. *He's right, I can't keep this up much longer.*

Chapter Twenty-Three

Silvermist padded hesitantly toward the fresh-kill pile, painfully aware of just how close Cricketfern and Waspcatcher were as they shared a meal. Upon searching through the pile and finding nothing but a mouthful of feathers, she gave up and retreated to the edges of the clearing, though not before catching Cricketfern's eye. He shot her a questioning glance and she struggled to respond with anything other than a rushed, but not unfriendly, nod. *I suppose I should be thankful for those voles I've been finding, despite how strange it is,* she mused to herself as she found herself a patch of sun to rest in.

Since newleaf had been unusually tough—for all the Clans—the prey she'd find mysteriously on her path during patrols almost felt like a blessing from StarClan. The rogues had finally started attacking patrols again, but now almost all of the Clans had been targeted. While the skirmishes within NightClan borders rarely resulted in more than a few scratches, or perhaps a torn claw, the attacks on other Clan patrols had resulted in several serious injuries. *And poor RushClan, newleaf was even harder on them than it was on us,* Silvermist thought sadly. At the start of newleaf, the melting snow and rains caused the river to flood their neighbor's camp. The elders, Cloudfall, Minnowbrook, and Hollyspots had all died in the flood, and the elder medicine cat, Rosefall, died trying to save them with Pikesplash. The warrior who helped suffered an injury in the flood that left him with a permanent limp, and he had retired to the elders' den shortly afterwards to rest with his sister, Sootmask.

On the day of the flood, Troutslip had rushed to the NightClan camp with Pebblestream and Lilypetal in search of assistance. Shortly before this, one of their patrols had been attacked by the rogues.

"Ripplestar humbly requests the aid of our neighbors," Troutslip had mewed pleadingly while the NightClan cats peered curiously out of their dens. "Many of our warriors are injured, and we have

no idea when our camp will be fully repaired. We aren't asking for much—help hunting, and looking after our elderly, at best."

Thistlestar had agreed to help immediately, of course—no cat deserved to suffer as much as RushClan did that moon. Waspcatcher had constantly offered his help to the RushClan cats, and even when they'd said they no longer needed it, the golden-brown tom remained visibly concerned. Similar to Waspcatcher's worrying, Sandfoot started to fret over his kits in SwiftClan, especially when they'd been apprenticed a moon or two early. Between the Clan's collective fussing over the RushClan cats, and their fear of the returning presence of the rogues, Silvermist felt like nobody else had noticed Daisynose's worsening condition over the past moons. *Thistlestar and Mistypool seem so painfully aware of how little time she has left,* she thought sadly. Just as her ruminations were about to tread towards a more dangerous train of thought, a commotion from just outside the camp caught her attention—along with everyone else's.

"Bring him into the camp," Cindertalon's calm voice rang out into the forest. "He can explain everything to Thistlestar."

At his words, Silvermist's heart shot into her throat. Was it Stormrunner? Had they finally found her brother? She quickly leaped to her paws, her eyes fixated on the bramble tunnel as it rustled wildly with the return of the patrol and what sounded like their fugitive. Grunts could be heard as the patrol shoved the unidentified cat through the camp entrance, followed by murmurs of indignance. With each noise, Silvermist took another step towards where they would emerge, until finally a bright yellow tabby tom stumbled into the clearing. *Wait, what?* Her heart dropped as she saw the tom, and the forms of Falconwing, Sandfoot, Newtsplash, and Cindertalon as they filed into the camp behind him.

"What in the name of StarClan is happening out here?" Thistlestar asked as he appeared out of his den, followed closely by Wrenfeather and Rowanspots. *How long had they been in there?* "And who exactly is this?" To nobody's surprise, Thistlestar's voice grew cold as soon as he saw the stranger in their camp. While Silvermist struggled to hide her visible disappointment, she realized that the

rest of her Clanmates had appeared out of their dens to witness the commotion.

"We found this tom *sleeping* inside of a hollow tree near the Twoleg clearing," Cindertalon informed the Clan leader quickly. "Quite frankly, he's lucky we found him before they brought another dog and set it loose. He also had this with him—it's like a den he can carry around, filled with things I've never seen a cat just bring with them on their travels."

The dark grey tom flicked his tail toward Newtsplash, who took a few steps forward. Hanging from her mouth was something round and woven; it did, in fact, look like a tiny den with a hoop to carry it by. The tortoiseshell-tabby molly set it down at her paws and lifted her head back up to speak.

"He said he's a traveling loner, and that he was only passing through," Newtsplash mewed slowly. "But we wanted to bring him to the camp, just in case he's involved with those rogues.

Thistlestar's gaze softened with consideration as he stared at the stranger and his unusual woven container. "What's your name, then? Explain yourself."

"Ah! My name is Blink," the yellow tabby perked up at the chance to introduce himself, and when he bowed his head respectfully, his blue eyes traveled quickly over the clearing. "I'm sorry to have intruded on your territory, but it's true—I'm just a traveling loner, and I mean you no harm. Normally, I'd steer clear of the Clans' lands, but I met a cat not long ago who said you could stand to meet someone like me and see what I have to offer. She told me to seek out the Clan hidden in the pine forest, which seems to be you!"

Instinctively, Silvermist leaned forward. *He met a Clan molly? Could it have been Mintwillow?* The idea of her lost mother meeting the stranger and sending him to their territory didn't sit quite right with her. A single glance at Thistlestar told her that he suspected the same thing as her, but when he spoke, it wasn't to question the thoughts they clearly shared.

"What is it you have to offer, then?" the grey-speckled tom asked slowly, his ears perked curiously. As their leader seemed to warm up to the loner, the rest of the Clan seemed to relax—even Newtsplash and Sandfoot, who seemed the most suspicious of him.

When asked, Blink reached a paw outward and into the woven-den that rested at Newtsplash's paws. "I am so glad you asked!" he chirped, pulling out his paw to reveal a few colorful flower petals hooked on his claw. Most of them were shades of orange, yellow, and red, and Silvermist thought one looked like the marigold in the medicine den storage. "If you crush up enough petals until their colors mix together, you can stain the color onto things like rocks, boulders, or trees, if the petals were potent enough."

"What would we want to do that for?" Waspcatcher asked, still sitting comfortably at his brother's side.

"I think it would look nice in the medicine den," Icemint spoke up quietly, her eyes round with wonder. "It would also give us something to do with old, extra herbs instead of throwing them away."

"Exactly right, young molly!" the yellow-tabby tom nodded his head and put the petals back into their container. Then, he pulled out a pawful of beautifully-colored pebbles, along with a few bundles of flowers woven together. "These might seem simple at first, but you can lodge the pebbles in small crevices, or put the woven-flowers in your fur, if you fancy that sort of thing."

Dovesong gave a considerate hum from a spot not far from Silvermist at that. Beside the loner, Sandfoot tilted his head curiously and murmured something to Newtsplash, who quickly nodded in response. Blink seemed satisfied with their responses and continued speaking.

"There are many more things I've collected on my journeys, like tufts of fur from huge, fluffy, white creatures that you could use as bedding. If you decorate your camp with these things, it could really liven things up a bit—and that cat I met was right, you could *really* use it."

"What do you mean?" Wrenfeather asked slowly, his eyes narrowing at Blink's words.

The loner seemed to realize he'd used his words poorly as he stiffened and slowly returned the items to their hole. "I just think that—and I mean this in the best way possible, really, your home is beautiful—the way you've woven the bramble walls together so thickly can come across as . . . well, a bit intimidating. If you add some of these items, it would add some color and really make things more welcoming!"

Some cats looked genuinely thoughtful; Icemint, of course, and Rowanspots both watched the stranger with their ears perked. Silvermist noticed how Cricketfern sent a thoughtful glance toward Dovesong, who shrugged at her nephew. Their siblings, along with the rest of the Clan, murmured to each other uneasily.

Only a few seem like they're willing to give him a chance, Silvermist realized, glancing back toward the tom. She remembered how the petals he showed everyone were mostly warm hues—striking yellows and brilliant oranges. *I can't say I blame them—roots and brambles aren't the best places for things like that. Stones and boulders, however, might see lots of use from his ideas . . . .*

"Excuse me, Blink?" Silvermist mewed, taking a tiny pawstep forward. The tom turned his blue eyes toward her, his ears perked and ready to listen. "The petals in that . . . woven thing—are they all the colors of the sun, like you showed us?"

"Well, yes, but you don't *have* to use orange or yellow," he quickly started explaining. "I actually saw several kinds of coral bell flowers growing through your territory, so you could easily find other colors—"

"It's not that I hate the idea," Silvermist tried to interrupt him casually, and was glad when he quickly ceased the unnecessary clarification. "I actually think it would be beautiful somewhere with lots of boulders, or rocks. But, well . . . ." She trailed off, letting her gaze dart around the camp at the bramble walls and large roots.

"There aren't too many stones here, are there?" Blink finished for

her, much to Silvermist's pleasure. He followed her gaze and twitched his tail tip rhythmically, as if he were thinking. "It *would* be much more eye-catching on stones, you're right about that."

"Exactly! You know, now that I think about it, I might know some cats who might be more appreciative of what you have to offer." Silvermist had to swallow down a burst of pride when Blink tilted his head in confusion.

"You do?" he mewed slowly.

"You do?" Thistlestar echoed at nearly the same time, turning his head to face Silvermist. He looked just as confused as Blink, along with the rest of their Clanmates.

The silver-furred molly nodded thoughtfully. "I've heard that the BlazeClan camp is built around a stone outcrop in their territory. I've seen bits of their land during Gatherings and border patrols—if their camp is anything like the rest of the territory, I bet those yellow and orange colors would be a hit!"

"If you think so, I'd love to meet those cats," Blink mewed quickly, perking up once more. "I just need shelter and food whenever I pass through the area, and if what you say is true, then I'm sure those BlazeClan cats would love what I can teach them."

Everyone's happy, then, Silvermist mused proudly and glanced around at her Clanmates. Most of them looked relieved that the loner was so willing to leave their territory—the deputy looked particularly pleased with the outcome. Thistlestar, however, cocked his tail and sent a glance at Silvermist.

"If you're going to continue through Clan territory, you'll need an escort." Though he spoke slowly, Silvermist immediately realized what her uncle was about to say, and she shook her head at him only to be ignored. "Silvermist, since you came up with the idea, why don't you show him the way? Cricketfern can go with you—you're both capable, but non-threatening, so the trip should be seamless."

Silvermist's heart dropped at Thistlestar's swift decision, but she

wasn't given any time to question it; it wouldn't make a difference, anyways. She and Cricketfern were far from the best hunters, nor the best fighters, which is what the Clan needed most now. Thistlestar waved his tail in dismissal and sent an encouraging nod in her direction before calling Wrenfeather and Rowanspots back toward his den. The rest of the Clan went back to their duties all too quickly, none of them noticing Silvermist as she stood frozen to her spot.

She watched as Icemint stepped away from the medicine den and trotted up to Cricketfern. After exchanging a few words, she shrugged and returned to her den. Cindertalon and his patrol each fetched a meal from the fresh-kill pile before grouping up with their Clanmates to eat, while the next border patrol hastily began to prepare themselves. Waspcatcher was one such cat, and as he rose from Cricketfern's side to join his patrol, he shot Silvermist a warning glance. She resisted the urge to bristle defensively as Cricketfern padded up to her, looking cautiously friendly.

"Icemint said that they don't have any traveling herbs prepared, so we'll have to do without," the brown tabby meowed. "We can either take prey with us to share, or we can try to hunt before we leave our territory."

"You can hunt if you want to," Silvermist quickly responded, cursing herself for how painfully awkward she felt. "I'm not that hungry, but if I develop an appetite while we're traveling, I'll be sure to speak up."

Cricketfern only frowned for a moment. Instead of saying something else, he just nodded and walked away to meet Blink at the camp entrance. Silvermist hesitated and glanced around the camp one last time, hoping to find Rookshade somewhere. When she didn't see him anywhere in the clearing, she couldn't tell if she was disappointed or relieved. *I didn't see him during all the commotion with Blink, either,* she realized. *He's been working hard with Cindertalon to monitor the territory from the shadows and keep the fresh-kill pile stocked, he must have slept right through it.*

With an internal sigh, Silvermist forced herself to trot cheerfully over to Cricketfern and Blink. For the first time, she realized that

the loner had hooked the woven structure around his neck rather than carrying it in his jaws like she'd expect.

"Are we ready to travel to this other Clan?" Blink asked, still as cheerful as before. "I have to say, I'm excited to see what the other territories look like."

"I'm sure you are," Silvermist forced enthusiasm into her voice and offered a nod. She flicked her tail and let Cricketfern lead the way out of camp, while absent-mindedly trying to keep the loner between them. "I haven't seen much of it myself, but when I was a kit, my mother told me that BlazeClan territory is the most unique of all the Clans."

The three cats set a slow but steady pace through the forest. Briefly, a silence fell over them—just as painfully awkward as Silvermist's previous interaction with Cricketfern. Even more unfortunate than that was the fact that she'd accidentally recalled memories of Mintwillow and Stormrunner when they were all still in the nursery together. *It all seems so distant and hazy now . . . was that even Mintwillow? I can hardly remember how everyone looked back then.*

"My parents used to say that the cats of BlazeClan were blessed by our ancestors. Their territory is so much more unforgiving than the rest of the Clans that when they were first formed, they almost perished." Cricketfern glanced sympathetically at Silvermist, as if he knew where her mind was wandering. The look was short-lived, though, and the brown tabby quickly fixed his gaze on the forest ahead of them once again.

"So it's true that you have ancestors in the stars?" Blink tilted his head and let his gaze bounce between the NightClan warriors. Before Cricketfern or Silvermist could respond, he continued, "Some loners I know said that Clan cats get mystical prophecies and omens to guide you. They also said there's always a *prophecy cat* who just *looks* like they'd be wrapped up in some kind of celestial shenanigans. Kind of like you, Silvermist."

"Like me . . . ?" Silvermist echoed, her step faltering a bit. With a shudder, she remembered Snowface and the strange StarClan cat

that she hadn't seen since her early apprenticeship—and with the recollection came thoughts of her ominous dream at Starfalls moons ago. Swiftly, she banished the thoughts and shot Blink a quizzical look, hoping he'd elaborate.

"Yeah, like you!" he mewed. "With your silvery fur and pensive blue eyes—not to mention the fact that you could probably tower over most cats I know, if you wanted to."

A soft chuckle came from Cricketfern and Silvermist felt her fur immediately burn up. She wasn't quite sure if she wanted to take the words in stride and stand taller, or if she wanted to shrink and make herself as small as possible.

For some time after that, they were all quiet. Every so often Blink would comment on the scenery, or on the tales of the Clans that other loners would tell him. While Silvermist did her best to offer enthusiastic and encouraging responses, she was painfully aware of her own existence, and she could feel the sense of self-awareness creeping up her spine. That, coupled with the awkwardness of interacting with Cricketfern again, was nearly overwhelming.

The feelings of self-consciousness only worsened as soon as they crossed through the Gathering clearing and emerged into the barren BlazeClan territory. Even with the stormy weather of early greenleaf, the soil underfoot felt dry. Some cracks could be seen dotting the landscape, as if puddles of mud had dried improperly in the blazing sun.

"Okay," Blink said after a particularly smothering silence. "This is getting unbearable, so I'll say it—I'm picking up on a *lot* of tension between the two of you."

"W-What?" Silvermist stuttered out before Cricketfern could respond. She was careful not to let her legs fail her alongside her voice.

"Don't play dumb," the yellow tabby scolded, though he sounded amused more than anything.

Before he could explain what he meant—as if he needed to—Silvermist caught sight of a BlazeClan patrol as they rounded a lone patch of bushes. Just as quickly as she spotted them, the BlazeClan cats saw them and came rushing up with their pelts bristled defensively.

"Cricketfern, what's going on here?" a brown tabby molly demanded, her amber eyes narrowed with hostility. At her side was a small silver-and-white molly with green eyes, her fur rustled to try and look larger than she is. *That's Duskpaw, isn't it?* Silvermist realized. *One of Amberlight's kits.*

"We mean no harm, Briarthorn," Cricketfern gave a reassuring purr and motioned toward Blink with his tail. "This is Blink, a traveling loner. We think he might have some things to offer your Clan, if Buzzardstar is willing to listen."

"You can't just—" Briarthorn started angrily, only to be cut off by a pretty brownish-grey molly that Silvermist recognized as Shellskip.

"It isn't your place to reprimand them, Briarthorn," she mewed softly. "We're on good terms with NightClan, and I'm sure Thistlestar sent them with pure intentions. Come on, you three."

"But what about the enemy Clan scent we've found in our territory?" Duskpaw asked, flicking her tail quickly. "Shouldn't we be more cautious?"

"What Clan scent?" Silvermist spoke up for the first time after exchanging a confused glance with Cricketfern.

"It's also not our place to share such things, *Duskpaw,"* Shellskip scolded gently with a purposeful look at Briarthorn. "I know Briar has taught you better. Let's go."

With that, they were led deeper into the rocky territory. Blink stayed quiet, and though he walked with a certain liveliness, Silvermist could see the way his blue eyes darted between the three BlazeClan cats. Silvermist stayed just as quiet, as did Cricketfern, and they both shared a few concerned glances while trying to

remain visibly friendly.

Before long, they came to a circular formation of massive, skyward-reaching stones, their peaks most certainly threatening to pierce the clouds. It didn't take long for Silvermist to realize it was the camp; not only was the arid BlazeClan scent the strongest here, but she could hear faint chatter echoing from inside the shelter. Shellskip led them around until they saw a portion of land where the rocks gave way to dried brambles, and then vanished into them.

Silvermist hesitated, eyeing the prickly branches. They were much drier than the brambles in their own territory; there were hardly any leaves attached, and the usually rich brown color was replaced with a brittle, greyish-brown hue. She gave Cricketfern a glance and, after hearing Briarthorn impatiently clear her throat, made her way through it. She could feel both Blink and Cricketfern close on her tail as the spiny stems threatened to pull out tufts of fur. Not soon enough she made it into the camp, followed closely by her companions and the rest of the BlazeClan patrol. Shellskip had already gained the attention of Buzzardstar and was speaking with her, while various cats chattered cheerfully around the camp.

Outside what she assumed was the apprentices' den, Silvermist could see a smallish white tom wrestling with a pale ginger tom. Duskpaw seemed to perk up when she saw them, and rushed over to them quickly.

"Blizzardpaw! Lightpaw!" she mewed excitedly, ignoring the way Briarthorn let out a grunt of indignation. "Can I play?"

"Silvermist and Cricketfern, how nice to see you both," Buzzardstar's mew took their attention, and Silvermist turned her head to see the brown-and-white molly approaching with Amberlight at her side. Shellskip had made her way to where a small group of cats formed around Absent, who looked like he was telling a story. "Shellskip told me you have an offer for me? I can only assume that's why Thistlestar would send two of his least-threatening warriors."

After sharing a look with Cricketfern and Blink, Silvermist stepped forward. "This loner actually has the offer for you. He

doesn't ask for much at all, and I personally thought what he has would suit BlazeClan more than the rest of us."

Buzzardstar turned a curious eye toward Blink, examining him for a few moments. "Alright, follow me, then. Amberlight, show these two where they can wait, and then fetch Shadowpath and Honeyberry to join me in my den."

"We're waiting here?" Cricketfern asked with a glance toward the slowly-sinking sun.

"Is that okay?" Buzzardstar questioned in response, her ears perking curiously. "If what this tom has doesn't interest us, I'd rather have him escorted away by the ones who brought him."

"It's fine, Buzzardstar," Silvermist quickly mewed before lowering her head in a bow. "We'll wait as long as you need us to."

The molly only gave a nod before leading Blink away. The two cats climbed up a steep ledge on one of the tallest stone walls until they reached a small cave, vanishing into it. Amberlight was quick to lead the NightClan warriors a few paces away from the camp entrance, then waved her tail at a spot next to a sun-warmed, flattened boulder.

"You two can wait here," the ginger-and-white molly murmured. "Hopefully my kits won't find a reason to bother you here."

"Er, Amberlight?" Silvermist called to her when the deputy turned to leave. "Is everything alright here? One of your apprentices mentioned stray Clan-scent inside your borders." Cricketfern tensed at the question but said nothing.

Amberlight hesitated before turning back to face them. "Duskpaw has always been a bit talkative," she gave a small sigh. "Everything is fine, really. Like everyone else, the rogues have started attacking our patrols, too, but we've been picking up faint traces of another Clan within our borders. We think they're just hunting, but with how thin our prey is, we can't figure out why anyone would steal prey from us."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," Silvermist murmured with a frown. "We haven't found anything like that in our own territory, but I'll relay the information to Thistlestar, if you'd like. We can have our patrols keep an eye open for anything strange."

"That would be helpful," Amberlight decided slowly, glancing between Silvermist and Cricketfern. "Thank you. We'll try to make our meeting quick."

That was the final thing the BlazeClan deputy said before turning off to fetch the medicine cats. Cricketfern sat quietly a tail-length or so away from Silvermist, who sat a bit closer to the boulder. For a while, they were engulfed by yet another painfully awkward silence, neither of them moving to break it. Silvermist caught Absent's eye from across the camp, and though he didn't approach them, he gave a friendly wave of his tail—a gesture she happily returned.

A few times, Silvermist found herself desperately wanting to say *anything*. A comment about the weather, or about the scenery of BlazeClan, or even about how surprisingly lively the camp was. Each time, she couldn't bring herself to speak. The words simply died in her throat before she could even open her mouth. *I wish Thistlestar hadn't sent us together,* she thought sadly. *I always feel like he sees right through me anymore.*

Suddenly, as the sun started to stain the sky vermilion with its retreat, she heard some shuffling from beside her. When she turned her head, Silvermist saw with a start that the white-furred apprentice from earlier had inched onto the stone she sat by. The young tom said nothing to her, but his presence was quickly noticed by Cricketfern, who scooted closer to them.

"Hello there," Silvermist started awkwardly when the cat stared at the deep orange sky. She turned her own gaze toward the sunset, admiring its colors. "The sky is always magnificent come sundown, isn't it?"

The apprentice shifted a bit and nodded. "I watch the sky every night," he said, sounding a bit proud of himself. "My papa told me that if you wanna find your true love, you have to sit on *this* rock

every evening until the sun vanishes—for four moons! Then, at the end of the four moons, Sunchaser will see you as she's sending the sun beyond the horizon, and she'll bless you with what you're looking for."

At first, Silvermist had to hold back a chuckle. She'd never heard of a nursery tale involving a cat named Sunchaser, and she was almost certain the apprentice's father had told him the legend to trick him into a lesson of self-discipline. Then she heard Cricketfern choke on a breath for a split moment, and she realized how familiar that tale sounded. *That's just like when we were apprentices . . . .*

She inhaled sharply and glanced at the brown tabby, realizing that he was looking at her, too. Silvermist ignored the way her fur heated up under his gaze and gave the apprentice an encouraging nod.

"You should keep at it, then," she told him. "In fact, I'm sure Sunchaser already has her eye on you."

"You really think so?" the apprentice asked, perking up excitedly. He kept his gaze fixated on the sunset, and Silvermist had to hold back a purr of amusement. "Do NightClan cats know the tale of Sunchaser, too?"

"Something like that," she murmured quietly, looking up toward the leader's den when a flash of movement caught her eye.

Buzzardstar emerged from her den, closely followed by Amberlight, Blink, and both of the medicine cats. The five cats quickly descended from the perch, the loner taking a bit longer than the rest as he teetered precariously. Then, Buzzardstar broke from the group and made her way over to Silvermist and Cricketfern.

"Hopefully I haven't kept you too late," she mewed apologetically with a glance at the sunset. "We've decided to keep Blink around and see what use we can make of his offerings, so both of you can head back to your Clan. Will an escort be needed?"

"No, we can find our way," Cricketfern assured her quickly. "I'm glad you have a place for him here."

"Of course. Give Thistlestar my regards, and travel safely." Buzzardstar nodded to them as they rose to their paws and retreated from the camp.

Once they were back in the open, Silvermist realized with awe how the sunset painted the territory red. With Blink gone, she and Cricketfern walked closer together than before, though it somehow felt less awkward and strained. For some time, their journey was almost comfortably quiet, until Cricketfern finally gave a soft chuckle.

"Sunchaser, eh? I can't say I've heard that one before, but it certainly sounds familiar, doesn't it?" he teased, flicking a stray pebble toward Silvermist.

"Hmm, yeah," Silvermist narrowed her eyes playfully, falling far too easily into the bout of teasing banter. "I remember how an apprentice I knew tried tricking me with a story like that. He looked so lost when I shot it down!"

"Hey, it wasn't a trick!" Cricketfern gave a snort of laughter and flicked another stone at Silvermist's paws. "I really believed that little myth—you can ask my mother or Waspcatcher, if you think I'm lying."

Silvermist couldn't hold back the laugh that erupted from her. "You would believe Newtsplash's tales, wouldn't you?" she snickered and nudged him sideways with her shoulder. "Lilypetal always used to tease me about how—Cricketfern?"

The brown tabby had fallen behind after being nudged, and Silvermist frowned when she turned around to check on him. He only stood there, his expression one of surprise at first. A soft breeze picked up right when his gaze softened into something more wistful.

"Hey, are you okay?" Silvermist asked quickly, taking a tentative step forward. Perhaps the teasing was too much. "If I went too far, I apologize—I didn't think before I spoke."

"Silvermist, what happened to us?" Cricketfern asked quietly, as

if he hadn't even heard her speak. The question surprised Silvermist, driving a painfully familiar spear through her heart. "We were so close before, why did you shut me out? Did Rookshade say something to you?"

Just shut the topic down, *Silvermist.* "I-It's hard to explain," she croaked out, her voice apparently developing a mind of its own.

"Would it hurt to try?" the tom pressed, his voice even quieter than before.

"It's . . . it's stupid," Silvermist mewed more firmly this time, turning away. "I'm sorry."

"Stupid?" Cricketfern echoed. She could hear his paws scuffing along the earth softly as he padded up to her again. "Silvermist, you hardly talk to anyone about what's truly on your mind. I haven't seen you relax like—like you did just now for moons. Whatever happened, I can assure you it's not stupid."

Each word resounded with a deafening thunder in Silvermist's ears. She could feel her veins going cold with panic, and she took a deep breath to try and stop herself from freezing up. *I've kept him at a distance for long enough, haven't I?* she asked herself. *StarClan, I need to get a grip.* Without saying anything, she beckoned toward the forestline ahead of them and took up a much slower pace than before. If they were going to have this conversation now, they could at least return to their own territory.

"I'm just—" Again, her voice threatened to give out, so she hesitated before trying again. "I'm . . . worried I'll end up like Mintwillow somehow. I'm worried that somehow, I'll end up with kits I can hardly talk to because they apparently look too much like their father—because, for some reason, I'd have a reason to be so *terrified* that I'd abandon everyone without so much as an explanation. And not your usual *run-away-during-the-night* abandonment, either, but the kind where you just vanish while your children and friends are being attacked and– leave them to think there's apparently no other choice, for whatever unspoken reason– I just—"

When she realized the way she'd started rambling, her voice growing angry—almost venomous—Silvermist cut herself off abruptly. Cricketfern was quiet for several heartbeats, and the lack of response made her burn up with shame. For a moment, she wondered if she should have held her tongue when Blink was brought to their camp.

"That's not stupid at all," Cricketfern finally spoke, his voice firm. "Everyone saw how she acted towards the end, but to be experiencing that from your own mother—of course you'd be scared of turning into her. I might not know everything that you do, but what I *do* know is that nobody should ever feel the way you do."

"You don't think it's stupid of me?" Silvermist asked quietly, surprised by his words.

"It's not stupid," Cricketfern drew closer to her once again as they neared their own territory. The fading sunset cast their shadows far across the land, and its warmth lingered under their paws. "It's definitely irrational, but that's what trauma like that can do to you. I just wish you'd felt comfortable telling me sooner, honestly—for a long time, I thought I did something to upset you."

"You could never," Silvermist laughed sadly as she crossed into the clearing around the Gathering Stones. "I shouldn't have shut you out like I did, I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize, you thought it was best at the time," Cricketfern murmured, nudging her reassuringly. "Are you doing okay, though? I saw you skip a meal before Blink showed up, and you haven't eaten since we've been out."

Silvermist stiffened a bit as she remembered just how hungry she felt. Her stomach growled right as they entered their own familiar territory. "Eh," she shrugged a bit and glanced around the darkening forest. "The fresh-kill pile was a bunch of feathers . . . I'm not a fan of birds, really."

"How about we hunt before we return?" her companion suggested, slowing his pace to a halt. "It's late, but I'm sure it wouldn't hurt."

"No, no, I'm okay," Silvermist quickly shook her head, not stopping. "I'm sure there's something at the camp." *Everyone probably thinks I can actually hunt, now that I've been finding those voles,* she thought, shame creeping through her pelt once more.

"What if I caught a fresh vole for you?" Cricketfern tilted his head, not moving to catch up to her. "You know I don't actually expect you to hunt, right?"

"Wait, what?" Silvermist froze and turned to look at him again. *There's no way he knows.* "I couldn't ask you to do that for me."

"I might not be the best hunter, but you were even worse than me," Cricketfern teased gently. "I know you and Rookshade have been going out to hunt together, but I honestly just figured he was catching extra for you to carry back."

He hardly waited for Silvermist's permission before he vanished into the darkness to hunt. Meanwhile, Silvermist was left with no choice but to wait for him, feeling both frustrated and amused by his insistence. Maybe Blink's arrival resulted in something good, after all.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Silvermist yawned as she exited the warriors' den. The camp was bustling with activity; Wrenfeather and Thistlestar made sure nearly every cat was busy with patrols or guard duty, and those who weren't were often tasked with looking after the elders or helping the medicine cats.

Only a few sunrises after returning from BlazeClan, Silvermist met Lilypetal when their patrols crossed paths. Her RushClan friend told her that they, too, were detecting faded Clan-scent within their own territory. Even though nobody had been able to pinpoint which Clan it belonged to, she couldn't help but feel like their neighbors were suspicious of them. *It's odd that they've both found strange scents, but we've not detected anything but the usual rogue-scents,* she thought to herself.

Quite honestly, Silvermist couldn't bring herself to be upset with the idea that the other Clans had grown distrustful. Moons had passed since she started finding prey placed in her path during patrols; while she had only been a little suspicious then, those feelings had only increased with time. Somehow, it felt like something Stormrunner might have done, though she couldn't imagine him staging attacks on the Clans or trespassing to steal prey—and the scent of mint that always lingered left her with a feeling of foreboding.

"Hey, Silvermist!" Sandfoot greeted her as he trotted up. "Have you been assigned to a patrol yet?"

"No, I haven't," Silvermist responded slowly, eyeing the pale orange tabby carefully. "Why do you ask?"

"Rowanspots is making another trip to SwiftClan—she said something about wanting to discuss an apprentice for their medicine cat," the older warrior explained quickly with a glance toward the molly he mentioned. "She still needs an escort, and

offered to bring me along, but I'm supposed to leave for a border patrol soon. I spoke to Wrenfeather about it, and he said if i could catch someone before they were assigned a patrol and get them to take my spot, I could accompany Rowanspots."

Silvermist twitched an ear as she processed what he said. "And you want me to take your spot on the patrol?" she asked plainly.

"Would you?" Sandfoot basically begged, his eyes growing round with his desperation. "I understand if you'd rather not—"

"Of course I will," Silvermist cut him off with a shake of her head. "I know you like to see your kits, and it isn't like I've got anything better to do. When is the patrol?" *He and I are strangely similar,* she thought as she kept her eyes on him. *With Vinecrawl's unknown mate, and Dawnstrike's disappearance. I'd hate to be the reason he can't see his kits.*

"It's supposed to leave shortly, but I think Newtsplash is still talking to Wrenfeather. Dovesong and Falconwing will be with you, too," Sandfoot explained quickly. From the camp entrance, Rowanspots called to him, and he jumped a bit. "I have to go—thank you so much, Silvermist! I'll make it up to you!"

Silvermist waved to him with her tail and glanced around, looking for the cats he mentioned. Newtsplash was indeed at the deputy's side, who looked like he was teetering between annoyance and amusement for his mate's doting. Falconwing was talking to Icemint outside of the medicine den, and Dovesong was talking to Cricketfern and Waspcatcher a small distance from the camp entrance.

After a moment of thought, Silvermist decided to join Dovesong and the molly's nephews—no, her own friends. As soon as she approached, the three cats greeted her, and Dovesong quickly realized why she had approached.

"So, you were Sandfoot's unfortunate victim, then?" she gave a purr of laughter after Silvermist mewed a greeting.

"I couldn't tell him no," Silvermist chirped back as she sat near

them. "How could I? He always seems so excited to see his kits."

"Weren't you supposed to have a day off today, though?" Rookshade's voice nearly scared the fur off of Silvermist's back, and she swore she heard a laugh from Dovesong when she jumped in surprise.

"You—" Silvermist started after recovering from the scare, "—have *got* to stop doing that. But yes, Wrenfeather told me last night I could take a day as long as I looked after the elders with Icemint."

Rookshade didn't say anything for a few moments as Falconwing approached the group of cats, followed closely by Newtsplash. Both Cricketfern and Waspcatcher rose once Silvermist's patrol gathered, both looking like they were ready to attend to their own duties. Instead of leaving, though, they both started saying their farewells to Newtsplash.

"Silv, I really think you should take the day off," Rookshade insisted finally, his voice a bit quiet. "Like you were supposed to."

Silvermist glanced at all their Clanmates and turned to him. "I already said I'd take Sandfoot's spot," she responded slowly. "I can't back out when the patrol is about to leave. You know this."

"They can handle one less cat for once," Rookshade pressed with a flick of his tail.

Silvermist hesitated and shot another glance at her denmates. "Hey, I'll catch up with you guys at the bramble tunnel. I won't be long."

Much to her relief, Dovesong, Newtsplash, and Falconwing all made their way closer to the camp entrance without questioning her. Cricketfern and Waspcatcher followed, talking with Newtsplash still, though the former shot her a curious look. Once they were out of earshot, Silvermist turned back to Rookshade and tilted her head a bit.

"Ever since the disappearances, we've hardly had enough warriors to keep patrols active. You know we can't have a patrol

that's short a warrior," she murmured quickly.

"I'm just worried," Rookshade let out a tiny sigh, looking away. "The attacks have gotten bad. My father and I have been finding a lot more rogue-scent near the trees, too."

"All the more reason for me to go and help our Clanmates," Silvermist shook her head and stood, ready to join her patrol at last. "I can handle myself, okay? Stop worrying over nothing. Even if something happens, Rowanspots and your sister know how to help."

"Silvermist—"

"Rookshade, aren't you supposed to hunt with Cricketfern and Cindertalon soon?" Waspcatcher mewed loudly right as his brother left to meet Cindertalon. "Stop delaying the patrols—the border patrol is late as it is."

The black-furred tom quickly silenced himself, and Silvermist realized that Waspcatcher's volume had attracted the attention of Wrenfeather. The deputy had fallen deep into a conversation with Thistlestar after Newtsplash left him, but now both toms were watching the group of cats from afar. Rookshade seemed to realize it, too, as he only offered a shrug and followed Cricketfern without another word.

Silvermist turned away from him and toward Waspcatcher and her patrol. She caught a glance from the golden-brown speckled tom, but instead of matching the criticizing looks he'd given her for moons, he just looked . . . exasperated, perhaps. After meeting Silvermist's gaze, Waspcatcher gave a firm nod before turning and exiting the camp. Ever since her conversation with Cricketfern during the trip back from BlazeClan, she had been talking to her old friends more, and Waspcatcher had become much more tolerable than before.

As soon as the tom vanished through the camp entrance, Silvermist and her patrol followed after him. When she emerged into the blooming forest, she saw that he had already found a spot to settle for guard duty. Waspcatcher nodded to them all as they quickly made their way away from the camp and toward the

western border. Even though her Clanmates were worried about the dogs Twolegs bring, Silvermist could only think of the coyote attack every time she passed the Twoleg clearing. As they neared it, the familiar sense of dread that the memory brought crept up her spine, though Newtsplash and Falconwing didn't seem to notice the tension that wove itself into her steps. Dovesong, however, fell back to walk by Silvermist's side.

"It's not always easy," the older molly mewed slowly, "moving on from something like that. If you want, I can lead the patrol along a different route today."

Silvermist hesitated. She had only told a few cats just how much the coyote attack had impacted her. Admittedly, she felt tempted by the offer; she hated going near that StarClan-forsaken clearing, but it would be wrong to not do their job as thoroughly as possible.

"It's okay," she responded after a few heartbeats. "I knew where we were going when I told Sandfoot I'd take his spot. There's no need to change things up for me."

Without waiting for a response for Dovesong, Silvermist bounded forward a few paces to catch up with Falconwing and Newtsplash. Dovesong was quick to catch up, though the pretty molly said nothing else as they neared the old clearing. The closer they got, the more Silvermist's dread grew until she felt closer to panicking than she had in moons.

In fact, it felt like she was being watched.

The sensation mimicked how she felt when she found herself dreaming her way into the Place of No Stars, where she met Snowface and the other, still-unidentified StarClan cat. Silvermist glanced at her Clanmates as they padded along the edges of the clearing—none of them seemed to get the same sensation that she felt now. Normally, she'd just brush it off and say her mind was playing tricks on her, but this time it felt *real*. Like there was something—someone—watching them.

Silently, Silvermist caught a stray twig in her claws and tossed it to the head of the patrol in an attempt to catch their attention.

When all three of her Clanmates stopped and turned back to look at her, she nodded toward the clearing and crouched beneath a large, drooping leaf for its cover.

"What is it?" Falconwing asked as he crouched near her with Newtsplash and Dovesong. Silvermist only shook her head and flicked her tail where they sat, telling them to wait where they were. *If I'm right, I'm the only one who has to be ambushed,* she thought darkly as she peeked out from under the leaf. Quickly, she surveyed the treetops, but she could hardly see anything through the walls of leaves that concealed the branches.

Silvermist slowly emerged from her cover and padded into the center of the clearing, trying to act as casual as possible. *I'm almost certain you're here, so come on out,* she thought darkly as her gaze bounced from tree to tree. Her hackles raised as the feeling of being watched intensified further, and as she made her way around the clearing, she could have sworn she heard the sound of a branch creaking.

After that, it was eerily silent. The wind was nearly dead, so she knew it couldn't have caused the noise she'd heard. Other than the dreadful feelings that were coursing through her body in waves, though, she didn't have any other proof of her suspicions. After a few more moments of mock-inspection, Silvermist stood up straight and turned to return to her patrol.

Just as she moved to face where she had come from, however, she was faced with a distantly familiar small black-and-white cat. *Badger.*

"Would you look at that?" the tom drew his lip back into a smirk as he half-sneered, half-purred the words. His eyes flashed with what looked like surprise before they darkened with some kind of sick amusement.

"I knew I smelled something rotten," Silvermist growled back, narrowing her eyes at Badger. She could still feel the sensation of hidden eyes burning into her pelt, even though he had revealed himself. "Where are your friends? Did you decide to play fair for once?"

"Look around you," he said and flicked his tail to the forest beyond Silvermist. "You being here makes things harder, but . . . ah, well. Nothing can be done about it now."

Silvermist spared a glance over her shoulder and saw that three mollies had crept out of the undergrowth behind her. Two of them she recognized—a pale brown cat with unnerving green eyes and a brown tabby with dark ginger markings. The third, young grey molly that looked about her own age, was unknown to her. Oasis and Sister Shade seemed to be absent from the group, as always. Then, she snapped her gaze back to Badger, who simply watched her with a mocking expression. *This snake-heart thinks he's got the upper hand, doesn't he?*

Then, Badger narrowed his eyes and opened his mouth to let out another sneering jab. "I bet you'd love to know where your brother is, wouldn't you?"

At his words, Silvermist's heart faltered in her chest before her veins ran ice-cold. She fixed her eyes on Badger's, straightening her body and stepping forward until she towered over him. *He's only trying to get you riled up, Silv,* she told herself as she held his scornful gaze. *Remember what Blink said—I could use my height to intimidate him and keep the advantage—*

"You don't scare me," he snorted before Silvermist could even finish her train of thought. "You might be as big as Sister Shade, but Oasis stands even taller than you. *Stormrunner* is about as tall as you, too, come to think of it." A second jab was enough to make Silvermist's vision go white with anger.

"Silvermist, don't—"

Before Dovesong could finish calling out her warning, Silvermist had flung herself onto Badger with claws flying. All around her, she could hear the snarling of battle as her patrol burst from their cover to fight the other rogues.

For once, Silvermist didn't feel the panic that normally overcame her. Instead, she felt overcome with an exhilarating fury towards the tom that fell victim to her blows. She hardly registered how few

of his blows landed, and even fewer left more than a burning scratch on her skin. *This must be how everyone else feels during battle,* she realized as she struck Badger across the throat, though she was careful not to deliver a killing blow.

Moments after, she heard a screech from behind her and she was shoved away from Badger by a tremendous force. Before Silvermist could realize what was happening, she felt herself get shoved backwards until she hit the trunk of a tree. In front of her, the pale brown molly gave a caterwaul so loud that the rest of the cats ceased their fighting to look at the commotion.

Everything happened so fast after that. Silvermist could see the horrified expressions of not only her own Clanmates, but the other rogues as the pale molly clawed at her before lunging toward her. She couldn't even will herself to react—all she could do was sit there as the molly dizzied her and dove for her throat.

There was a sensation of searing pain as teeth tore into her own flesh; pain unlike anything she'd felt before. As soon as the battle had started, everything was still, and Silvermist's vision went black.

When Silvermist opened her eyes, she saw that the world around her was the same blackish-blue as the night sky. She looked down at her paws and saw that they were submerged by this dark color, though there was no unusual sensation—simply solid, yet invisible ground. Even stranger yet was the sight of tiny stars floating around her paws, and she found that if she moved her paws, the specks would sway with the movement.

Then, she noticed a strange light reflecting onto the floor in front of her. Hesitantly craning her neck to find the source, Silvermist realized that she was faced with three *enormous* cats—bigger than trees themselves—with deep indigo pelts. Just like the ground, stars outlined their forms, and their eyes mimicked the moon. Upon closer inspection, she saw that they looked just how she imagined the ancients of LionClan, TigerClan, and LeopardClan to look, if they were made of stars.

"Oh, StarClan," Silvermist whispered when she registered just what that meant for her. Terror shot through her body, but as she tried to back away, she found that she was frozen in place.

The three giants said nothing as they gazed down on her with their sightless eyes. Suddenly, one with stripes outlined by the stars in its pelt narrowed its moon-like eyes, and Silvermist felt her body get pulled toward the three beings. Panic rose within her as she quickly scrambled to get away; the stars beneath her paws swayed and danced with the movement, but it was no use, and she was pulled even closer to them.

"W-Wait!" she choked out desperately while trying to make sense of what she was seeing. "What is this?! I-I'm not ready to go—!"

"Please reconsider!" a second voice rang out, the sound striking a cord in Silvermist's memories.

Immediately, the invisible force pulling Silvermist forward ceased, and the three giants turned to the speaker. Silvermist quickly turned her head to find the source of the voice and felt a wave of relief wash through her when she saw the familiar starry-furred stranger from so long ago. They were visibly frightened; even from a distance, Silvermist could see their trembling, but they held their head high.

"I'll gladly add time onto my sentence," they offered when the giants said nothing. "As much time as you deem appropriate, Great Ones." *Their sentence?* The words echoed in her mind, leaving her confused and worried.

Again, the entities were quiet, as if they were contemplating the StarClan cat's words. Then, they spoke, their voices reverberating together as one.

"Explain yourself, Hollowstar," they commanded.

"You know I can't do that," the starry cat responded evenly. "Doing so would break the protocol you so mercifully placed on all Silverpelt residents, and according to said protocol, I can only utter such information in the presence of medicine cats and leaders—and

only when given permission. I understand that I've gone against your word, but I humbly ask that you trust me this once."

There was a silence again as the three colossal forms turned their sightless gazes back to Silvermist, whose pelt crawled under their attention. Then, the one with a mane made of stars stepped forward and lifted its muzzle.

"You will speak of this to nobody," they ordered, the voices of the other two echoing quietly beneath its own. "Should you reveal what you've witnessed here, you will be denied entrance to Silverpelt entirely, and your spirit will be sentenced to walk the bridge between worlds until it fades. In order to conceal what has happened in this realm, your wound will not be fully healed upon awakening. Return to your Clan's healer swiftly, and pray to the stars that you don't make us regret this decision."

Silvermist couldn't even find it in herself to speak as she felt her body get pushed back to where she had come from. She turned her gaze onto the cat who had shown themself repeatedly—Hollowstar—and only found that the questions she wanted to ask drowned in her throat. Similar to how quickly the battle with the rogues had ended, Silvermist found her sight fading back to a pitch black.

Upon regaining consciousness, Silvermist could hear foreign, panicked voices. They certainly weren't the voices of her Clanmates, and she kept her eyes shut and body still as she tried to get an understanding of the situation.

"Rico, you said nobody would die!" a soft voice trembled between words.

"Stars, this is bad." This voice was the only one she truly recognized—it was Badger, and he sounded terrified. "Oh, they are going to be *livid*. How can we explain this?"

"Easy," a third voice snarled. "She was going to kill you, Badger. I couldn't let that happen!"

"Are you stupid?" Badger retorted, though he lacked the contemptuous tone he usually took. "Clan cats don't kill unless they have to! She barely scratched me, Orchid!"

"Shut up, all of you!" the voice of the fourth rogue commanded harshly. This one sounded just as panicked as the others, though it was much steadier. "We need to go before they send their entire Clan after us. Orchid can explain herself—she's the only one to blame for what happened. Get into the trees and go!"

Claws scraped against bark as the rogues climbed into the trees and fled. Their fear-tinged scent faded quickly, and Silvermist immediately snapped her eyes open and struggled to her paws. She could feel the blood oozing slowly from the wound on her throat; she didn't know much about injuries, but she was certain it had been healed just enough for her to make it back to the camp and receive treatment. *Thank StarClan we fought at the clearing, and not further down the border,* she thought with a wince as she tasted the blood in her mouth.

Carefully, Silvermist made her way toward the camp, following the still-fresh scents of Falconwing, Dovesong, and Newtsplash. *They must have tried to fight to stay by me,* she realized as her heart throbbed at the thought. *I need to get back fast.*

After what *felt* like an eternity, the camp entrance came into view; Waspcatcher was still on guard outside the tunnel, and he stood rigid with his eyes scanning the forestline. As soon as he saw Silvermist emerge into view, his green eyes widened and his jaw dropped. Without uttering a single word, the golden-speckled tom darted forward and offered her a shoulder to lean on as they made their way into the camp.

"You might want to hold off on those reinforcements," Waspcatcher announced as he helped Silvermist into the camp. Shocked gasps rippled across the crowd as the Clan saw the state she was in. She saw her patrol standing by Wrenfeather and Thistlestar with their pelts bristled and their eyes wide.

"Silvermist!" Thistlestar choked out before bounding over. A mixture of dread and relief came from him in waves, almost

overwhelming Silvermist, who hadn't said a word yet. "We were just about to send out a battle patrol to get the rogues. StarClan—what happened? They said you were dead!"

"Clearly, I'm not," Silvermist responded through gritted teeth.

"In my den," Icemint ordered, hardly sparing Thistlestar a glance as she stepped between them. "That wound needs to be treated immediately."

Without having a chance to speak further, Silvermist was ushered into the medicine den. If she were being honest, she was grateful toward Icemint for pulling her out of the attention of her Clanmates. Her body hurt, her mind was whirling, and her heart was stuttering against her ribcage like butterflies threatening to break loose.

While Silvermist was coming to terms with exactly what had happened to her, Icemint silently inspected her wounds and began her treatment. The grey-and-white molly instructed her to lay in a makeshift nest before she cleaned the blood out of her fur; then, she swiftly applied cobwebs and a poultice onto the wound.

Icemint turned away once again to sift through the herb store as Rookshade burst into the medicine den. His amber eyes were round with worry, and his chest heaved as if he were out of breath.

"Is she okay?" he demanded, as if Silvermist wasn't conscious no more than two tail-lengths away. The wounded molly frowned at his visibly unease.

"I'm fine," she mewed guardedly, her voice feeling rough in her throat. "Relax."

"She's lucky to be alive," Icemint snapped as she came back with what looked like thyme. She fixed Silvermist with a scolding gaze and added, "If that wound was any deeper, you'd have bled to death!" *Oh, if only you knew,* Silvermist bit back the retort as Rookshade rushed to her side.

"I told you not to go on that patrol!" he muttered, the emotion in

his voice foreign to Silvermist.

Once again, Icemint kept her from responding by hurriedly nudging the thyme towards her. Silvermist closed her eyes and consumed the herb. As much as she wanted to dwell on everything, she found that she suddenly lacked the energy to do so. Instead, she let her mind run blank as Rookshade rested his tail protectively over her flank.

Chapter Twenty-Five

By the time Rowanspots had returned with Sandfoot, Silvermist's pain had been eased by Icemint's treatment. The elder medicine entered the den with a bundle of fresh goatweed clamped tightly in her jaws, her muscles taut with worry. Cindertalon poked his head in for a heartbeat—he must have been the one sent for Rowanspots, Silvermist realized—and once he saw that his old apprentice was safe, he gave a nod and backed out of the den.

Rookshade still sat at her side, though Silvermist had brushed his tail off of her multiple times now. As Rowanspots shuffled over to inspect her wounds, the black-furred tom finally backed away.

"You're remarkably stable for someone whose entire patrol thought they had died," Rowanspots commented after a few moments. "I could see that mistake from my sister, but Falconwing and Dovesong rarely make such mistakes."

"Well, clearly they were wrong," Silvermist said, holding the medicine cat's gaze. "I'm here and very much alive."

Rowanspots narrowed her eyes for a fraction of a heartbeat. Silvermist wondered if she was just imagining things as the molly turned to Icemint, checking what the molly had used to treat her. After the younger cat listed off the herbs used—cobwebs, with a poultice of tansy and goldenrod—Rowanspots gave a nod of approval and turned back around to inspect Silvermist further.

After a short while, the medicine cat finally backed off just as Sandfoot hurried into the den. Rookshade immediately grew close to Silvermist again, and she tensed a bit.

"StarClan, I can't believe it . . . Silvermist, I'm so sorry!" Sandfoot gushed as soon as he saw her. "I never thought something like this would happen."

"It's okay," Silvermist assured him quickly. She could feel

Rowanspots' stare burning into her pelt as she spoke. "You couldn't have known. I'm just glad nobody else got seriously hurt."

Suddenly, Rowanspots was on her paws. Her amber eyes were dark with something Silvermist couldn't decipher as she snapped, "Okay, give my patient some space. All of this talking is unnecessary —she needs to be resting. Out. All of you—yes, Rookshade, you need to leave, too."

As soon as she spoke, Sandfoot retreated from the den with one final apologetic glance at Silvermist. Rookshade left with much more reluctance, though he moved more quickly when the medicine cat sent a glare in his direction.

Then, Rowanspots sent a meaningful glance in Icemint's direction; Silvermist hardly had to ponder over it to notice what she wanted the molly to do.

"I'll go check on the other three," Icemint mewed with a glance at Silvermist. "And I'll make sure nobody else bothers Silvermist while she's resting."

With that, the grey-and-white she-cat grabbed a few bundles of herbs and swiftly exited the den. Moments after she left, Rowanspots turned to Silvermist and sat down.

"What happened out there?" she asked plainly. Silvermist eyed her carefully; her tone was genuine enough, she decided, so she answered as honestly as she could.

"I mean, everyone already knows," Silvermist spoke and tried to settle further into her makeshift nest. "We got attacked by rogues at the Twoleg clearing. I took a heavy blow to my throat and I guess I lost consciousness for some time. I don't know how long I was out, but when I came to, my patrol and the rogues were both gone. I got up and somehow made it back to the camp on my own, which is when Waspcatcher saw me and helped me inside."

"Okay, good, but now I want to know the truth," Rowanspots narrowed her eyes again as her tone grew almost accusatory.

"I just told you the truth!" Silvermist gasped and bristled in defense.

"That's a load of fox-dung," Rowanspots spat quietly, rising to her paws. The tall molly loomed over Silvermist's resting form. "I inspected the battle site before coming back to the camp. Even the rogues left fear-scent behind. Where I found your blood, there was enough blood for a cat to have bled to death—yet here you are, healthy aside from an injury you'll be nursing for a few pawfuls of sunrises. I'll ask you once again, what happened?"

Silvermist frowned and eyed Rowanspots closely. At first, it looked like the medicine cat was angry with her, and she couldn't quite tell *what* she was being accused of. Now that she took a closer look, however, she realized that it wasn't anger she was detecting. It was something unnervingly similar to fear.

"Look, I told you, nothing else happened," she forced her voice to stay steady as she answered the question again. Part of her wanted to ask what Rowanspots had seen to become so spooked, but she knew she couldn't without revealing exactly what she was told not to.

And certainly cats from StarClan wouldn't order such things without good reason, even if they were strange, star-lined giants that she'd never heard of before. Right?

"Fine, don't tell me." Just like that, Rowanspots calmed down and looked away. "I know there's something you're not telling me. Maybe you think you can't, for whatever reason, but it's important for medicine cats to know these kinds of things."

"I'm sorry, Rowanspots," Silvermist mumbled slowly. "There's nothing more I can tell you."

That part was the most truthful she'd been upon returning to the camp. Even if it was only for a moment, she felt relieved to not have to lie. Rowanspots' eyes widened only a fraction as Silvermist made sure to hold her stare, hoping to get the message across silently.

"I believe you," the medicine cat sighed at last. "I'm sorry for snapping, Silvermist. StarClan has just been so silent since I got my first omen."

"I remember my first day on a border patrol," Silvermist mewed softly, finally looking away. "I asked if warrior apprentices could get special dreams the way that medicine cats do—I thought it was the coolest thing. Wrenfeather just laughed and told me that StarClan doesn't even like to share with the medicine cats anymore."

"Did you?" Rowanspots asked, her voice gentler than Silvermist had ever heard. "Get dreams from StarClan, I mean."

The question made Silvermist hesitate, and she frowned as memories resurfaced behind her eyes. "I think . . . maybe we don't know as much about our ancestors as we thought," she responded after a few moments of contemplation. While she didn't know exactly how much she *could* say, she didn't want to keep lying to Rowanspots of all cats. "Like . . . like what really happens when we die, *o-or* things they might advise the medicine cats to do? I think there are reasons for what they do or don't do, even if they seem senseless and unjustified. The best we can do is live our lives and love our Clanmates, right?"

"Right," Rowanspots nodded and closed her eyes for a moment. "I'm going to help Icemint check on the others. You should get some rest—I'll make sure that nobody sneaks in to bother you."

"Actually, could you send Rookshade in?" Silvermist suddenly felt small as she remembered something that had bothered her since she settled into the nest. "I have something I want to talk to him about."

Rowanspots' gaze flickered suspiciously over Silvermist before she nodded and exited the den. Moments later, Rookshade entered and rushed over to the silver molly.

"Rowanspots said it was okay to come see you," he purred, reaching out to lick Silvermist's forehead. "I know I've said it a ton, but I'm so glad you're okay, Silv."

"Thanks, Rook." Silvermist ducked away from his touch and tried to not cave when he backed away, looking a bit hurt. "Actually, there's something I feel like I should ask you."

"Of course," Rookshade responded without a moment of hesitation. "You can ask me anything, Silvie." Silvermist tried not to cringe at the nickname, the sound of it rattling her ears like claws dragging down the side of a stone.

"Why were you so bent on having me stay at the camp earlier?" she asked slowly, watching his body movements carefully. His ear twitched slightly at the question, and he tried leaning forward to nuzzle her.

"I was just worried that you were overworking yourself," he murmured, frowning when Silvermist ducked away from him again. "You've been doing so much to help lately, you deserved a day off! And now look, you nearly died. *I* nearly lost you."

"I find that hard to believe," Silvermist mumbled quietly, glancing at her paws. "That's the first time in moons I've been on a patrol during a battle with the rogues, Rookshade. With the way you were trying to make sure I stayed in the camp, it . . . I started feeling like maybe you knew about the attack."

"What?" Rookshade reeled back in surprise. "That's ridiculous. It's pure luck that you haven't been involved in an attack until now."

"Actually," Silvermist added when she saw the way his tail flicked back and forth, the movement almost escaping her attention. "I just remembered something interesting that the small tom, Badger, said to me before the fight. It seemed meaningless at the time, but now that I've had time to look back on it, it feels wrong somehow."

Rookshade frowned, and Silvermist didn't miss the way his eyes darkened for a heartbeat. "What, you're listening to rogue taunts now? Silvermist, I know you're smarter than that."

"He said my presence there made things harder for them," she

said, ignoring Rookshade's attempts to avoid the accusation that was preparing to surface. "It's like he had some reason to believe that I wouldn't be there during the attack. *Specifically* me. Rook, I need you to understand something here—" She hesitated as she tried to speak without revealing the haunting scene she'd witnessed.

"You should rest," Rookshade gave a sympathetic sigh. "A battle like that is a traumatizing experience, and you seem a bit shaken up."

"Don't try to placate me," Silvermist warned and tried to slowly sit up in her nest. "I was so near death that every single one of those rogues thought they had killed me. Rowanspots said that there was so much blood, any other cat would have bled out—she couldn't fathom how I didn't."

Rookshade silenced himself and fixed Silvermist with a wounded expression. "You were that close to dying . . . ?"

"If StarClan were any less forgiving, I would be dead right now," she muttered in response. Part of her wanted to tell him the entire truth—she wanted to scream it for all the Clans to know.

"Alright!" Rookshade mewed suddenly, turning to look away from Silvermist for the first time since he entered the den. "I haven't been entirely honest with you, and I'm sorry."

"So you . . . knew about the attack?" Silvermist pressed, tilting her head as she watched the black-furred tom. "Was that it, or is there more?"

"There's . . . a lot more you deserve to know about," he admitted, his shoulders hunching a bit as he spoke. "Before I start, I want you to know that I genuinely have feelings for you, Silvermist—I like you. I like you a lot, actually. I understand if you get mad at me for what I'm going to say, but my feelings for you are real."

Silvermist frowned at that, feeling her heart lurch and fall into her stomach. His tone, for some reason, reminded her of how Mintwillow had left. *Maybe some things* are *better left unsaid,* she thought. Even though Silvermist worried that she'd regret asking for

such truths, she didn't make a move to stop Rookshade as he continued.

"I only started talking to you because Stormrunner wanted me to distract you from Cricketfern," Rookshade whispered, glancing at Silvermist hesitantly. "When he left to join the rogues, I continued to watch over you and report your schedule to him in secret. He just wanted to make sure you were safe throughout the attacks, but I just—it ended up being so much more than that for me, Silv. That's—that's why I didn't want you on that patrol today. I'd already told him that you would have a free day at the camp, and I *knew* something like this would happen, but I didn't know just how bad it would be."

Silence filled the den for a few moments. Silvermist could hear their Clanmates in the clearing outside, bustling about and probably preparing to track down the rogues. Then, as she slowly registered his words, the noise turned into static and she closed her eyes.

"He joined them, then?" Silvermist asked slowly, keeping her eyes shut. "I guess I put too much faith in him. Ferrettail and Dawnstrike must be with him, too. Is that another secret you've been hiding from us?"

She wasn't even sure of what she was saying anymore. Words just tumbled carelessly out of her mouth, while her thoughts swirled together like the sounds from the camp.

"I've already said too much," Rookshade muttered quietly, as if he were convincing himself to reveal how even more of Silvermist's life was a lie. "Damn it, you deserve to know the truth; it's your life that's involved, too! Stormrunner said that he met a cat who claimed to be Mintwillow's mate. Your father."

"So what?" Silvermist snapped her eyes open suddenly. "He ran off to be buddy-buddy with a cat who doesn't *really* know him? To stage attacks on the Clans like it's nothing—and for what? I knew they were looking for my mother, but she's long gone. Or, what, was that all a big lie, just like everything else? Is she with them, too?" A sarcastic laugh erupted from her at the last few words, and she tried to ignore how the effort of it made her wounds ache.

"No, Stormrunner said it's not like that!" Rookshade quickly jumped to his paws, turning to face Silvermist again. "I believe he has good intentions, Silvermist. Can't you trust me?"

"Rookshade, are you seriously asking me that?" Silvermist dropped her voice and held his gaze evenly. "You come in here and admit to not only lying to me, but our entire Clan, and then ask me to trust you? What would you do if I took this information to Thistlestar right now? That wasn't just a small lie about stealing prey from other Clans, or having a secret mate—our Clanmates, our *families* have gotten hurt from this. Do you understand how serious this is?"

"Is that what you're going to do, then?" his voice mimicked hers, dropping into a whisper. "I can't say I blame you. I would have gone to him myself, if I thought it would help us."

"StarClan, I don't even know what to say to you." Silvermist's stare turned into a glare as she struggled to keep a lid on her anger. "You should leave. Make sure your brother wasn't hurt—unless you've forgotten, he was at the fight, too."

"He didn't almost die," Rookshade murmured with a frown, concern weaving its way into his voice as if nothing they'd just said had meant anything.

"Out!" Silvermist snapped, narrowing her eyes. "Get out."

Rookshade flinched a bit at the harshness of her tone before finally listening to her. He turned around, his tail dragging along the floor of the den as he left. Silvermist watched him go, and when he finally vanished out of her sight, she sighed and crumpled back into her makeshift nest.

Now that she was left alone, Silvermist closed her eyes and tried to process everything that Rookshade had just told her. Part of her was relieved to know the truth, while regret lurked beneath that. *What does knowing this even do for me?* she asked herself bitterly. *I know I need to go to Thistlestar with this, but what good will it do? Rookshade probably won't continue meeting Storm, now that I know.*

As if her thoughts had summoned him, Thistlestar nosed his way into the den quietly. Silvermist jumped a bit when his presence pulled her out of her own mind. For a moment, the two cats only stared at each other.

"It sounds like the Clan has settled," she commented when she realized how quiet the camp had grown.

"Wrenfeather led most of the warriors to try and track down the rogues," Thistlestar explained quietly with a shake of his head. "Some stayed to guard the camp—Falconwing, Waspcatcher, and Dovesong are watching the bramble tunnel, and Wren asked me to stay, as well."

"They won't have much luck finding them," Silvermist scoffed a bit and looked back down at her nest. "They vanish into the trees far too quickly, and we haven't been able to mimic it or figure out how to detect them when they're so careful."

"I think most of our Clanmates know that; they just want to try." Thistlestar paused and took a few small steps closer. "How are you feeling?"

Silvermist hesitated for a few heartbeats. "Thanks to Icemint and Rowanspots, I'm feeling much better," she finally responded, shooting her uncle a grateful glance. "Thank you for checking on me, Thistlestar."

"How could I not?" the white and grey tom murmured. "I've already lost my sister and your brother—and Dawnstrike, as confusing as she could be. I can't lose you, too, Silver." At the mention of the three missing cats, Silvermist frowned and wrapped her tail closely around her body.

"Uncle, I—" she started before cutting herself off. What did she even want to say? For so long, she had a feeling that Thistlestar knew more than he let on, but she was no longer sure if she *really* wanted to know more.

"You don't have to say anything, Silvermist," Thistlestar mewed when she lost her words. "You always seem so lost in thought lately,

but I won't press—especially not now. Take your time to rest, and if there's something nagging you after you've healed, then you're always welcome to speak your mind."

"A-Alright," Silvermist mumbled quietly. "Could you sit with me for a while, if you're not joining the others?"

"Of course I can." Without hesitation, Thistlestar moved to sit by Silvermist, his tail resting comfortingly over her shoulders. "Try not to worry. NightClan will see this through, just like we always have."

Chapter Twenty-Six

"It's not like you to be so clumsy!" Icemint's scolding voice echoed softly across the camp as she treated a few scratches on Rookshade's cheek. "I nearly thought these were claw marks, Rook! What were you thinking, running into thorn thickets?"

Silvermist watched from her spot near the elders, who had invited her to share a sun-patch with them. At first, she'd tried to politely decline, but she caved when her grandmother insisted. She tried not to crowd the elders too much while she enjoyed the warm rays and the break from her patrols. Ever since the battle—ever since she learned what she did, about so many cats—she'd started going on as many patrols as Wrenfeather allowed. At first, he was cautious of her pushing herself so soon after leaving the medicine den. With Rowanspots' support, though, he let her attend as many patrols as she could without overworking herself.

She'd be lying if she said it wasn't an attempt to distance and distract herself from some of her Clanmates, namely Rookshade. Luckily, she stayed friendly enough to keep most cats from worrying; it became even easier once her wound healed and her long fur covered the scar from sight.

Sitting with the elders like this almost feels . . . therapeutic, she thought with a glance at the five cats. Even on her patrols, she couldn't keep Stormrunner and the rogues off of mind—much less the ominous StarClan cats she'd seen. Their chatter gave her something else to think about, for once.

"Sandfoot said one of his kits got sick," Vinecrawl's tired voice caught Silvermist's attention. "He's been worried sick, begging to go to SwiftClan to check on them—I can't say I blame him. I hate that one of my grandkits is suffering so soon."

"Didn't Vinestar say they lost Stemflake and Bristlehawk to the sickness at the last Gathering?" Mistypool chimed in. "It sounds like that strange sickness from a few seasons ago is creeping back."

"Oh, I hope not," Daisynose wheezed quietly, her chest heaving with the effort of breathing. "With how dry greenleaf has been, it would be a shame for another outbreak to strike."

"Well, they haven't confirmed if it's the same as before," Snailbelly spoke for the first time as he stretched out in the sun. "I'm more worried about BlazeClan—they lost both of their elders because of how dry and hot it's been! Poor Brambletuft, and Aspenblaze too."

"Don't you two have cousins in BlazeClan?" Lynxtail mewed quietly, flicking her short tail towards Snailbelly and Vinecrawl. "Bouncepool's and Aspenblaze's kits?"

"I'm not too worried about them aside from Aspenblaze's passing," Snailbelly responded easily. "Wildrunner and Heatherpool are younger than Wrenfeather, you know. They're able warriors. I just hope Ripplestar lets them come to the river for water."

"I'm sure she will," Mistypool wrapped her tail around Daisynose's shoulders as the grey-and-cream molly coughed softly. "Ripplestar has shown herself to be far less arrogant than Wolfstar—especially with how quickly she sent for help during the flood. She's a promising ally for both BlazeClan and us to have."

"Silvermist?" Silvermist had become so invested in the elders' gossip that she hadn't even noticed when Cricketfern approached her. "Are you . . . doing okay?"

"Not really," she admitted instinctively after taking a single glance toward him. Quickly, she tried to cover up the moment of insecurity with a soft, though noticeably forced laugh.

"Do you wanna talk?" Cricketfern asked and sat down hesitantly. "It might help to just get your thoughts into the open air."

Silvermist looked toward the elders, who had become silent as they listened in on the conversation. "I love our Clanmates, but sometimes they can be pretty nosy," she mewed jokingly, catching a few of their gazes. "I think I'll have to pass."

"Let's go somewhere else, then," the brown tabby suggested as if he had already planned on it. "Rowanspots wanted me to collect some moss for her, anyways."

"Isn't that normally Icemint's job?" Silvermist asked, glancing back toward the molly and her brother.

"Yeah, but she's busy taking care of Rookshade's scratches," Cricketfern chirped with a hint of amusement in his tone. "And Rowanspots can't be bothered to fetch the moss, I guess. I know better than to argue with her."

"Alright, let's go, then," Silvermist sighed and stood up. She turned to the elders and added, "Thank you all for inviting me to rest with you."

Cricketfern stood and led Silvermist out of the camp without another word. Instead of heading to the usual moss-collecting spot, however, he turned and took what seemed like a detour around the camp and to the north. Silvermist glanced around as they walked through the thick undergrowth, noticing how birds sang in the distance.

Now that she was given a chance to think about it, she realized that the territory was unusually peaceful lately. The rogues hadn't attacked NightClan ever since she nearly died, though the other Clans kept reporting injuries from battles. The thought that Stormrunner had actually joined them sickened her every time she tried to think about it. They had hurt so many cats, and for what?

Before she realized it, they had come upon a clearing that must have been close to the camp. In fact, she recognized it from one of her attempts to search for her brother. A large log stretched across the center with ivy and moss draped across its bark. Now that they were well into greenleaf, the flowers had swelled into a full bloom, and a few white butterflies danced around the petals.

As Cricketfern led the way to the log and sat near it, Silvermist took the scenery in. Then, she hesitantly padded after him and sat a tail-length or so away.

"This is a nice spot," she murmured quietly, pulling her tail around her paws. "I bet the sunset would really make it glow."

"I actually told you about it when we were apprentices," Cricketfern responded after a moment. "But my father never gave me permission to show you, and then . . . ."

"And then," Silvermist echoed his words softly and shot him an apologetic glance. "Cricket, I can't apologize enough for everything."

"You never had to apologize to me, Silv," Cricketfern mumbled before clearing his throat. "Anyways, what's been bothering you? I'm gonna take a wild guess and say it has something to do with Rookshade, considering how you've been avoiding each other."

Silvermist stiffened and tried to hold his gaze. "You noticed that?'

"Well, yeah," he responded as if it were the most obvious thing. "I'm sure I wasn't the only one. What happened?"

"The day of the battle, after I had been taken care of in the medicine den, I realized that things weren't quite adding up," Silvermist started hesitantly; though she had dwelled on the revelations plenty, she hadn't uttered a word of it to anyone until now. "Rookshade was so adamant about whether or not I went on that patrol, and when there was the attack, one of the rogues said something strange. I asked him about it, he said that not only did he know that Stormrunner joined the rogues, he's been meeting with him to report when I'll be in or out of the camp. I'm still trying to process it myself, and there was a bit more, but . . . ."

Not to mention the fact that I'm still struggling to grasp what happened to me, she added bitterly inside her head after her voice trailed off.

"Hold on—" Cricketfern said with a frown. "Wow, that's a lot worse than I expected you to say. The battle was nearly two moons ago, Silvermist; shouldn't we tell Thistlestar? He needs to know if someone is hiding something so serious."

Guilt threatened the edges of her mind and Silvermist quickly looked away. "I don't know. I'm still upset with Rookshade, but I don't want him to get into too much trouble. Besides, now that I know about it, it doesn't seem like he's going to continue meeting Stormrunner."

"Whatever consequences Rookshade faces will be fair—that much I know." Silvermist slowly looked back toward Cricketfern as he spoke. "If anything, he'll probably just have Wrenfeather and Cindertalon keep an eye on him. You know Thistlestar isn't one to be unjust, and he deserves to know that the suspicions we've had are true."

"Don't you think it will make things with the rogues escalate?" she asked. She could hardly stand the thought of a full-blown battle with not only the rogues, but her old Clanmates; Shade's crew might have fewer numbers, but they've proven how relentless they could be.

"You know it will," Cricketfern shrugged, though she could see he looked just as conflicted. "I heard my dad talking to Cindertalon a few sunrises ago, and they seem to think it's better to get the battle over and done with. The rogues have hurt far too many."

"I wouldn't trust those rogues in a battle, but you're right," Silvermist sighed softly and rose to her paws. "Do you need help bringing moss back to the medicine cats?"

"Mouse-dung, I nearly forgot," Cricketfern mumbled and jumped to his paws. "Rowanspots will have my pelt if we take much longer."

"I doubt Newtsplash would let that happen," Silvermist purred softly and quickly helped him gather moss.

Once they'd collected enough, she and Cricketfern swiftly made their way to the camp. Once outside, a new scent caught her attention and made her stop in her tracks. Cricketfern stopped as he, too, noticed it, though after a moment of pondering he only offered Silvermist a shrug.

"Odd . . . maybe we found another loner like Blink? It seems

familiar," he mumbled around his bundle of moss. "Whoever was guarding the camp entrance must have followed them inside, too."

No, it's almost too familiar to be some plain old loner, Silvermist thought, but she didn't voice it when Cricketfern continued into the camp. She just followed him quietly and scanned the camp while they headed toward the medicine den. Rowanspots sat beneath the overhanging root outside of the medicine den and paid them no mind. Her tail tip was twitching rhythmically as her eyes darted from cat to cat.

Newtsplash hovered a few tail-lengths away with Dovesong, Sandfoot, and Waspcatcher, and they were murmuring quietly to each other. The elders' den fostered a similar sight as all of the retired warriors whispered much more hurriedly among themselves. Just outside the warriors' den, Rookshade sat with Falconwing, though the brothers weren't saying anything—their gazes were fastened on a trio of cats just outside of Thistlestar's den. After having a closer look, Silvermist froze only a couple of pawsteps away from the medicine fen.

Wrenfeather and Cindertalon sat close together. At first, their bodies nearly blocked out the sight of the third cat, but one of them shifted as they spoke and revealed that *Ferrettail* was sitting with them. Silvermist hurriedly dropped her moss just inside the den entrance, ignoring the confused noises that came from Cricketfern and Icemint as she immediately backed into the clearing again.

What is he doing here? Her mind started racing as she took a few pawsteps toward Wrenfeather and the other toms. Toward Thistlestar's den. *Why couldn't Cricketfern and I recognize his scent? He hasn't been missing* that *long.*

"Wrenfeather?" she called out hesitantly after proceeding a few more pawsteps. "What's going on?"

Both Wrenfeather and Cindertalon stiffened as they turned to acknowledge Silvermist's presence. She was acutely aware of how their other Clanmates silenced themselves and realized that nobody else had asked about it yet.

"Where's Thistlestar?" she pressed when the deputy didn't answer her. "Wouldn't he address . . . whatever this is, with you? I was going to speak to him, but—"

"Silvermist," Wrenfeather cut her off with an uneasy glance toward the leader's den. "Now is not the time."

"W-What?" Silvermist froze when his words echoed in her ears. Suddenly, she felt like she was an apprentice again, her pelt burning when she realized that she had the attention of the entire Clan. *No, this is too familiar,* she thought as her stomach started to churn.

"We're handling it," Wrenfeather continued with a gentler tone. "Thistlestar will address the Clan when it's time."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Silvermist asked quietly as even more words pulled a memory from the depths of her mind. "Cindertalon?"

With a glance at Cindertalon, desperately searching for a hint as to what was going on, she realized her old mentor wouldn't even look at her. Then, as she turned her gaze toward her uncle's den, she realized she could hear—very faintly—the sound of *voices* coming from beneath the boulders.

Who else is here? she wondered, hesitating for a moment. She shot a brief glance around herself, catching Cricketfern's worried gaze from Rowanspots' side. Icemint was with them, looking *sympathetic*. The sight was more than enough for Silvermist to push herself forward, ignoring Wrenfeather's protests as she carefully made her way into Thistlestar's den.

"Uncle, I don't know what's going on, but there's something I really need to tell—" Silvermist's voice faltered when she fully entered the den and saw who was there. "—you."

Sitting less than two tail-lengths away was Mintwillow. Her dark silver fur was disheveled, and her green eyes were dark with distress, but when she caught sight of Silvermist, her features softened.

"Oh," Silvermist mewed slowly. "You came back." No wonder everyone was acting strange.

"Of course I did," Mintwillow murmured, stepping closer to the silver-point molly. "I had to make sure you were okay. StarClan, you've grown so much—"

"Why?" Silvermist cut her off as she tried to untangle her emotions. "You left without a proper explanation after acting like we didn't exist—even after you told us about our father. Why are you suddenly so concerned?"

"Silver . . . ." her mother whispered, pausing in her movement. "I know I could never apologize enough, but I'm here now."

"She has a point, Mintwillow," Thistlestar spoke up for the first time, pulling his tail around his paws. "I thought I understood why you left, but now that you're here with Ferrettail, I'm no longer certain."

"I've told you," Mintwillow said with a firm voice once again. "I did what I thought was best."

"How was *that* the best option?" Silvermist asked with a step forward. "You left when we were being *attacked.* We didn't know where you had gone, or why, only that you had vanished and *clearly* weren't coming back."

"It was to protect you!" Mintwillow retorted and stood tall. "The rogues were trying to get to me the entire time. I thought if I left and made sure they knew, they'd just follow me into the lands beyond the territories."

"A lot of good that did," Silvermist snapped without realizing. She paused for a moment and gathered herself before continuing. "Why did you come back after all this time?"

Mintwillow fell quiet at that, turning her gaze onto Thistlestar. The white-furred tom looked confused, though, and tilted his head.

"Mintwillow, why *are* you here?" he asked. "And what is Ferrettail doing with you? We thought he joined the rogues with

the others."

"Ferrettail is the one who brought me back here," Mintwillow finally said after a few tense moments. She hesitated again, visibly struggling to form proper words, before motioning toward Silvermist with her tail. *"Their* father is with the rogues, and now Storm is with him. Thistlestar, I *told* you that they could never meet him!"

"I never knew who he was," Thistlestar snapped. His fur was bristling, his eyes wide with disbelief. "What could I have done?"

"You could have kept him from joining a band of rogues, for starters!" Mintwillow growled, all signs of hesitancy gone. "Even Ferrettail knew it was serious enough to find me—"

"You were the one who left, though," Silvermist spoke up before the argument could escalate again. "I mean, at least it felt like things could be okay before that. Once you left, though, things got out of control. You can't blame Thistlestar for that."

"I said I did it to protect you and your brother!" Mintwillow protested, turning on Silvermist.

"And if that's true, then your plan clearly didn't work," Silvermist responded coolly. "Otherwise Stormrunner might not have joined them."

"It's hardly my fault that this happened—" Mintwillow gasped, her eyes going wide.

"Mintwillow, have you finished explaining yourself?" Thistlestar interrupted suddenly, flicking his tail towards the entrance of the den. "If so, you should wait to explain yourself to the Clan with Ferrettail."

"No, this is *serious,* Thistle!" Mintwillow retorted. "Their father has Stormrunner and knows he is his son. It's only a matter of time before he tries to get to Silver, too—he's probably already carrying out his plan!"

"What plan . . . ?" Silvermist mumbled and remembered how

Sister Shade had tried to recruit her. "What, does he want me to go with him, too?"

"Ferrettail didn't tell me all of the details, but that's part of it," the dark silver tabby admitted and looked away. "He found your brother, and now he wants to find you, and he'll stop at nothing until he gets you."

"What if he thinks I'm dead?" Silvermist suggested after a moment thought. "There was an incident a moon or two ago where we were attacked and I nearly died. I only lost consciousness for some moments, but when I came to, the rogues all thought they killed me."

"If that's the case, then the situation is worse!" Mintwillow insisted. "He could tear this entire forest apart!"

"Surely they would have seen you, though," Thistlestar shook his head softly. "You've been going on border patrols more often than anyone else. It *has* been strangely quiet since then, though."

Silvermist quickly nodded before voicing her agreement. "The other Clans are still suffering from attacks, too. Even MistClan got attacked, and it was such a serious fight that Lichenstar gave three apprentices their warrior names! Why would they stop attacking us?"

As soon as she finished speaking, she reminded herself why she came to see Thistlestar. Now that Mintwillow had revealed half of what she had intended to say, she wondered if she should still tell him about Rookshade.

They're probably too distracted by this to worry about who Rookshade talks to, she thought to herself. Mintwillow and Thistlestar continued going back and forth about what to do—Mintwillow, of course, saying they should immediately take action to defend themselves. Silvermist only watched quietly.

"Sir?" Wrenfeather's voice came from the entrance behind Silvermist. "Everyone is wondering when we'll address this. Is everything alright?"

Silvermist tried to become smaller as the golden-brown tom entered and sat in the space between herself and Thistlestar. The den was almost too small for four grown cats, but she didn't want to be the one leaving if they decided it was too cramped.

"Mintwillow has brought new information to light," Thistlestar explained quickly. "She thinks the rogues are planning something bad, and says we need to prepare to defend ourselves. I'm just trying to make sense of everything before I make a decision and tell the Clan."

"I hate to say that I agree with her," Wrenfeather muttered after a moment. "We should take the fight to the rogues, instead of waiting for them to attack us again. Our Clanmates are tired, and they want this to be over—as do the other Clans."

"Wait," Silvermist frowned. "Take the fight to the rogues? What if we end up fighting Stormrunner, or Dawnstrike?"

"If our old Clanmates side with the rogues in battle, then they've chosen their fate," Wrenfeather decided with narrowed eyes. "Obviously, we won't kill any cat unless there's no other choice—but we can't force them to be on our side, Silvermist."

"What if I try to find Stormrunner by myself?" Silvermist responded slowly, twitching her tail as she tried to think of something.

"Absolutely not!" Mintwillow snapped. "If he's with them, it's too dangerous—"

"Hear me out!" Silvermist cut her mother off quickly after noticing how Thistlestar listened with his ears perked. "I think I have a way to find him, and if it's only me then he might come out. I don't want him to get hurt over this."

Thistlestar and Wrenfeather exchanged a thoughtful glance before the leader spoke. "Do you think you can get him to come home safely?"

"I'll certainly try," Silvermist mewed with a nod. *I won't take no*

for an answer, she decided internally, holding her uncle's gaze.

"Alright, it's decided, then," Thistlestar stood and shook out his pelt. "Silvermist, do what you have to do. If you find yourself in a dangerous situation, get back to the camp as soon as you can. Mintwillow, you and Ferrettail are going to explain yourselves to the Clan while she tries to find Stormrunner."

One by one, the four cats left the Thistlestar's den. Silvermist immediately scanned the gathered crowd for Rookshade. *There's one thing he can do to make up for his lies.*

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Silvermist padded through the forest swiftly, heading away from the camp and toward the river. At first, part of her regretted how aggressively she'd approached Rookshade, demanding to know where she could find Stormrunner. When he had only responded with short phrases and a curt tone, however, all of her regret washed away.

Telling me how to find him was the least he could do, she reminded herself as her pace quickened into a trot. *To think they met near Starfalls, of all places!* She glanced at the southern horizon as she traveled, noticing how sinister storm clouds were starting to form in the distance. The air grew hotter with each passing moment, and she was grateful to know that soon the dry spell would be relieved.

When she left the camp, Mintwillow and Ferrettail had been explaining themselves to their Clanmates. More accurately, Mintwillow was struggling to explain while Ferrettail revealed an elaborate plan that was supposed to help both Mintwillow and the Clan. Apparently, he *did* ultimately leave because he felt there was nothing left for him, but it took deep consideration of the moons prior—he knew they were searching for Mintwillow, and wanted to try and keep them off of her trail while keeping them occupied away from the Clans. He never expected that Dawnstrike or Stormrunner would follow him, and even less did he expect to discover the identity of Mintwillow's mate.

Even though neither of the warriors had revealed the identity of her father, Silvermist found herself respecting Ferrettail much more than she previously did. Stormrunner and Mintwillow sounded so shallow when they claimed their actions were to protect others—specifically her—but she hardly expected the brown-and-white tom to have such a thought-out plan.

Before Silvermist realized it, she'd reached the area where Rookshade said to search. She had hardly even noticed when the forest briefly gave way to the river shore, or when shrouds of mist

started tangling around her paws. Now, the mist was thick, and she slowed her pace until she was standing still in the undergrowth.

"Stormrunner?" she called out hesitantly. "Please, I just came to talk."

There was no response—only silence. Silvermist slowly padded through the mist-covered forest, desperately searching for a trace of her brother. There wasn't a single sign of him, though, or of any Clanless cat. She called out to him a few more times, only to be disappointed by an overwhelming silence each time.

Eventually she found herself staring at the celestial pool itself. The crashing water no longer sounded comforting, nor did the shimmery mist feel mystical to her. With a couple more pawsteps forward, Silvermist stared down at her own reflection and let a soft sigh escape her.

Rookshade probably lied, she realized as she stared at the rippling image. She didn't even know how much time she had lost at this point. Despite knowing she should return to NightClan, she kept looking down at the water, noticing something she hadn't seen before.

It was the first time she'd really seen her own reflection. Sure, she's had chances, but this was the very first time she *actually* looked at herself—the markings in her fur. There was only one cat she knew that bore a similar appearance, but that would mean—

"You shouldn't be here," Stormrunner's voice startled her, and he padded out of the undergrowth by the waterfalls. "You shouldn't have come looking for me." *So Rookshade didn't lie, after all.*

"Mintwillow is back," Silvermist said, ignoring his warning. She glanced up from the pool to meet his gaze. "I don't know if she's staying. She said she left to protect us, you know."

"That's a load of fox-dung," Stormrunner responded. There was a quiet anger to his voice, one that Silvermist didn't expect from him.

"Yeah. I know," she mumbled. "But it reminded me of someone

else I knew."

Stormrunner was quiet for a few moments before he spoke again. ". . . I know that Rookshade told you everything. I—"

"I don't want an explanation right now, Storm," Silvermist cut him off before he could try to excuse himself. "I want you to come home. Everybody misses you. Thistlestar. *Icemint."*

"Everything was to protect you," Stormrunner kept talking as if she hadn't interrupted him. "And I have to keep working harder to make sure everyone stays safe."

"You built a life out of lies for me—to *protect* me?" Silvermist countered quickly. She glanced back down at her reflection before she could grow too angry. "Nobody has been safe through this. Our own Clanmates and friends have been seriously hurt."

"It wasn't your *whole* life." She barely heard how he muttered a response under his breath, and snapped her gaze back up to meet his.

"That doesn't make it any better," she scolded her brother, resisting the urge to step closer to him. "Are you proud of what happened? Proud that you tricked me for *moons?"*

Stormrunner didn't say anything in response. For once, he looked lost and remorseful; any anger dwelling inside of him had vanished for now. Silvermist tried to hold his gaze, but he looked away quickly and narrowed his eyes.

A soft breeze blew through the small clearing, carrying with it a new scent. Someone else was there, hiding somewhere, and Silvermist thought she faintly recognized it. She noticed how Stormrunner caught it as well, his head whipping up to stare at the undergrowth around them. His jade-colored eyes went wide with surprise—whoever was near, he clearly didn't expect them to be there.

Suddenly, Silvermist felt a presence behind her. She glanced over her shoulder slowly and froze when she met the deep blue-

eyed stare of Oasis. *It's him, isn't it?* she thought incredulously. A single glance at Stormrunner practically confirmed her thoughts; he was bowing his head to the huge tom.

"I knew that Ricochet and the others were mistaken when they reported your death." A purr from Oasis demanded her attention, and Silvermist slowly turned to face him. "There was simply no way —I know you were too cunning to be beaten by that lot. You take after me, after all."

"Dad—" Stormrunner hissed quietly, but Oasis ignored him.

"I know this must be . . . shocking, Silvermist," the seal-point rogue continued. "Your brother told me how Mintwillow kept the truth hidden. She's got a strange view of the world that I never quite understood, but we're together now, so all can be forgiven. Come be with us."

"I'm– I'm sorry?" Silvermist said slowly and eyed Oasis. "I don't even *know* you."

"We have all the time in the world to fix that," Oasis purred, stepping closer. "You don't need that silly Clan, or their rules. You can live however you want with us."

Silvermist only stared at him for a few moments, dumbfounded. "I can't leave them, they're my friends—my family!" *No way he's seriously asking me to abandon everyone I care about.*

"I'm your family," Oasis corrected her. He narrowed his eyes a bit, looking much more intimidating. "I'm your father! You should be with me." The change in his demeanor made Silvermist hesitate before responding again.

"I'm sorry," she murmured carefully and bowed her head to him, "but I have to reject your offer, Oasis. I can't just abandon my life with NightClan. I know you're mad about what Mintwillow has done—trust me, I feel the same, but—"

"It wasn't a request." With her head lowered, Silvermist saw how Oasis unsheathed frighteningly sharp claws. "You *will* leave them,

and then I'll find Mintwillow and make her pay for the way she corrupted you."

Silvermist instinctively backed away and felt wind brush her whiskers as Oasis' claws flew past her muzzle. She stared at him with wide eyes and dared a glance toward Stormrunner, who looked as horrified as she felt. Anger quickly bubbled up inside of her, and she flicked her sight back to the cat towering in front of her.

"I don't know who you are, but you're certainly not my father," she growled. "Our mother was so scared of you that she warned our family to never let us meet you before we were even born—and now I see why. She was so afraid that she decided to vanish during an attack by *your* rogues!"

"That's because she was a coward!" Oasis snapped angrily and sheathed his claws. His tone grew softer; apologetic. "All I wanted was for us to be a family, Silvermist."

"Then you shouldn't have attacked my Clanmates," Silvermist retorted with a hiss. "I'm done here. Stormrunner, if you don't come home with me, then I guess this is goodbye."

She didn't even look at her brother as she tried padding into the undergrowth beyond Oasis. The huge tom shifted to the side, blocking her path. When she glanced at him, she saw that his eyes had darkened with a somber expression.

"You'd really burn with them?" he asked sadly. "And for what reason? You think *they're* your friends?"

"Burn with them?" Silvermist echoed slowly, glancing at Stormrunner again. He looked even more terrified than before and wouldn't meet her gaze. A foreboding feeling quickly took over her body. "What are you talking about?"

Oasis only shrugged. "It doesn't matter now. You won't make it back in time, even if you knew."

He turned and vanished into the undergrowth with a single

glance over his shoulder. Silvermist stared at the plants in horror before turning to glare at Stormrunner. She didn't say anything—she knew she didn't have to—before she turned to pelt after Oasis toward the NightClan camp.

They only had enough power to attack a single patrol at a time, she told herself as she raced through the forest. Her father's scent had already vanished, but she didn't care. *There's no way they have enough power to take on the whole Clan, especially not now that Ferrettail and Mintwillow are back.* Oasis sounded so sure of himself, yet she couldn't figure out what he could possibly have planned.

As Silvermist neared the NightClan camp, her thoughts traveled back to Starfalls. What would Stormrunner do, now that the choice is there for him to make? Surely he wouldn't side with the rogues. The air had grown thicker, as if the forest was anticipating the battle that was nearing. Soon, she could see the tall bramble walls that framed the camp against the giant mess of tree roots, and she perked her ears to detect any signs of battle.

For a few moments, it was quiet. Then, panic surged through the air as one of her Clanmates let out a screech of surprise. The sound was quickly followed by yowls of battle, and Silvermist rushed into the camp as fast as her legs would take her. Inside, she could see cats tumbling across the camp with claws flying. Icemint was peeking out of the shelter of the medicine den, her eyes wide with surprise as Rowanspots fearlessly batted away any rogue that got near. There was no explanation for why the rogues would start a battle *in the NightClan camp,* no matter what Silvermist tried to think of.

Surely they'd be outnumbered. Usually, they only attacked in a group of four or so cats, and while they showed they could take on a full patrol, there's no way those rogues could take on all of NightClan.

Then she saw Sister Shade. Wrenfeather and Falconwing were working together to fight her, but she overpowered them *far* too easily and swung her gaze around the camp. Silvermist froze when she realized what the giant molly was looking for. *Where's Ferrettail?* she wondered as she desperately searched through the mess of cats.

"There you are!" Shade snarled eagerly just as Silvermist spotted him. "You think you outsmarted us by fetching that snake-heart?"

Ferrettail and Thistlestar stood in a little nook near the leader's den. Behind them, Silvermist could see Mintwillow trying to hide beneath the shadow of the Highroot, though her silver-and-white fur stood out painfully. Before Silvermist could force herself to move, Shade flung herself toward Ferrettail only for Thistlestar to intercept her. In the blink of an eye, Sister Shade grabbed Thistlestar by the scruff and threw him harshly against a creeping root as if he weighed little more than a newborn kit.

Silvermist felt sickened by the thud her uncle made, and winced at how he lay limp and disoriented for several moments afterward. She finally rushed forward to try and help Ferrettail when she saw them standing muzzle-to-muzzle. Her Clanmate had to stretch to meet Shade's gaze properly, and she swore she saw a hint of fear in his otherwise fearless expression.

"Where do you think you're going?" Oasis' voice sent a nauseating chill down Silvermist's spine as he stepped in front of her path. "Ferrettail needs to learn what happens to deserters, Silvermist. Don't worry, Mintwillow's judgment isn't far behind."

"You're twisted," Silvermist growled as she tried to peer around his form. "You and Shade both."

"Is that so?" Oasis sneered and leaned closer to Silvermist. "What if I told you all of this could have been avoided if Mintwillow hadn't stolen you from me? Perhaps *she's* the twisted one; after all, she's the reason all of this is happening."

Immediately, Silvermist felt the familiar feeling of dread start creeping through her body. *StarClan, not now—Ferrettail can't fight her on his own!* she fretted before trying to rush around Oasis. She didn't get far, however, as Oasis stuck out a paw to trip her before pressing her muzzle into the earth with a sheathed paw.

"Oh no—he won't be getting help from you, or anyone else, by the looks of it."

Silvermist struggled against his strength, noticing how most of the rogues were easily fighting two of her Clanmates at a time. Badger had cornered Dovesong against the elders' den, and she could see the elders peeking out with fear in their eyes. Falconwing was trying to help Ferrettail, but every time he got close, Shade would turn and bat him away and then face Ferrettail again—all within a heartbeat. Just outside the warriors' den, Cricketfern and Waspcatcher were struggling to keep up with the attacks from the same molly that tried to take Silvermist's life.

Rookshade had appeared outside of the medicine den and was helping Rowanspots keep a smaller grey molly away. Icemint still peered out, her green eyes wide with fear as she witnessed the battle. A flash of cream-colored fur darted in front of her vision, and she realized that Dawnstrike was present and fighting Sandfoot.

Like Falconwing, Wrenfeather had recovered from their skirmish with Shade and was fighting a brown-and-ginger molly with Newtsplash at his side. The rogue had apparently been trying to get to Thistlestar, who was being helped to his paws by Cindertalon. Silvermist met his gaze and stopped struggling momentarily, watching as he surveyed the camp before and turned to her old mentor.

He muttered something quickly, his chest still heaving as he motioned to the battle around them. Cindertalon didn't say anything in response to whatever Thistlestar had told him; instead, he nodded before calling to Rookshade. Then, the two dark-furred toms withdrew from the fight and raced out of the camp.

"Orchid, it's time!" Oasis snarled, reminding Silvermist of her predicament. The pale brown molly immediately backed away from her fight with Cricketfern and Waspcatcher and pelted out of the camp, much to Silvermist's dismay.

She glared up at Oasis, but before she could start struggling again, Oasis' weight was gone. Quickly, she leaped to her paws and saw that even though Thistlestar had barreled into him at full force, Oasis had only staggered a few pawsteps backward. Silvermist stepped up to her uncle's side and prepared herself to help him fight the rogue in front of her.

Instead of raising his claws to them, though, Oasis only smirked. He stood tall, nearly towering over Silvermist, but didn't show a single sign of an attack.

"This is quite the dilemma you've found yourselves in," he mewed while the battle raged on around them. "Now that Orchid is gone, you're two warriors stronger, but it's far too late for you to save everyone."

"What are you talking about?" Thistlestar demanded, lashing his tail. "What are you planning?"

"Thistlestar!" Mintwillow cried out from where she huddled. "We need to get everyone to safety—hey, let go of me!"

Silvermist turned and saw Sister Shade shove Ferrettail to the side and grab Mintwillow by the scruff. As she dragged her out, Ferrettail ignored his wounds and surged forward to help, only for Shade to bat him away just like she did to Falconwing. As she watched the events unfold, frozen at Thistlestar's side, Silvermist swore she caught a faint trace of something sharp and acrid in the air. However, as soon as she detected it, it was gone.

"Minty," Oasis gave a sickeningly sweet purr and shoved his way past Silvermist and Thistlestar. He gave them both a threatening glance, warning them to stay put as he moved. Silvermist could only watch in horror as he padded up to her mother—still struggling in Shade's grip—and leaned forward to say whisper something to her.

"You wouldn't!" Mintwillow gasped and fell still. "That's—"

"Ingenious, isn't it?" Oasis laughed and stepped back. "I'd kill you myself, but it's much more rewarding to see you burn."

Then, he nodded to Sister Shade, who dropped Mintwillow only to pin her down with unsheathed claws. The grey molly lifted her head and let out a yowl so loud that everyone in the camp stilled.

"Nyx, fall back with me. Ricochet, Badger, and Dawn, you know what to do." With each word, Silvermist could see Shade digging

her claws deeper into Mintwillow's flesh; blood quickly trickled down her mother's pelt when the rogue leader removed her paw and retreated to the camp entrance with the smaller grey molly at her side.

"Silvermist, this is your final chance," Oasis murmured, suddenly *much* closer than she remembered him being. "The rest of these flea-bags may not be so fortunate, but you can still join me and fight alongside your brother."

Stormrunner. Silvermist quickly glanced around at her Clanmates, growing more panicked when she realized that the other rogues kept them pressed against the innermost walls of the camp. How could she have forgotten about her brother? Unlike Dawnstrike, he was nowhere to be seen during the battle. Was it wrong for her to hope he made the right choice?

"Someone else is coming!" the small grey molly hissed urgently. "Oasis, we have to do it now, otherwise we might get caught in it!"

In front of Silvermist, Oasis narrowed his eyes. "Fine, then. Don't say I didn't try. Everyone, with me—don't let any of them escape the camp!"

Before Silvermist could respond—or anyone, really—the rogues retreated from the camp. Badger was the last to go, and he pulled sections of the bramble tunnel loose to serve as a temporary barrier.

Thistlestar was the first to rush forward, tearing at the segments of thorny brambles to make it through the tunnel. Silvermist quickly followed when some of her Clanmates ran after him, only to stop when they realized that only one cat could fit at a time. Thistlestar's white fur vanished into the camp's entrance tunnel and, for a few moments, it was quiet. Then he returned, looking grim.

"The exit is sealed," he said slowly. "The old tree trunk just outside of the camp—at some point, they must have loosened its grip on the soil to move it. It's too heavy for a cat to move alone, and the tunnel isn't wide enough for more than one cat to fit. Wrenfeather, check the secret exit behind my den. If Dawnstrike used that to vanish before—"

"I checked when the others had the rogues distracted," Wrenfeather cut him off and shook his head. "I was going to try and sneak the elders out, but the tunnel is full of stones and loose soil. It looks like it caved in recently—during the commotion."

"That was done deliberately," Mintwillow spoke up weakly. As she moved, Silvermist caught the same rancid scent as before—it was sour, and made her fur stand on end. "They want us to be trapped in the camp."

"What would they gain from that?" Dovesong asked. The elders had slowly emerged from their den, though they still huddled behind the pretty molly. "The warriors can just climb onto Highroot and the other roots to get out of the camp, can't they?"

"No." Ferrettail's voice was quiet and grave. "It wouldn't be enough. The elders won't be able to climb that, and any of us who are wounded would probably cause more harm to ourselves."

Rowanspots rushed toward him suddenly with Icemint close on her tail. Silvermist could see how dark the older molly's expression was, even when most of it was hidden by the herbs she carried. When Rowanspots sat at Ferrettail's side and inspected his wounds, Icemint ran toward Mintwillow and helped her rest against a smaller, curved root.

"What do you mean?" Thistlestar mewed. To Silvermist's surprise, he didn't sound suspicious at all; only worried. The horrible, rotten smell only grew stronger, and she was certain now that her uncle and other Clanmates had noticed it.

"They've set fire to the forest, Thistlestar. There's no way we can get everyone to safety like this."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Silvermist could only stare at Ferrettail and Mintwillow in shock. Of course the forest was burning; nothing else could explain the horrible smell she kept detecting. She glanced at Thistlestar and felt her heart fall at his shattered expression.

"What in Silverpelt happened here?" Cindertalon's bemused voice echoed softly over the camp's walls, announcing his return.

"Why– is this stump . . . ?" Rookshade could hardly be heard, his words broken by breathlessness. "Never mind—Dad, there's a fire spreading this way. I almost got cut off at the river."

"Cindertalon, Rookshade!" Thistlestar called before rushing to the edge of the camp. "The rogues blocked off most of the exits. Are either of you hurt?"

"No, sir!" Cindertalon called back. "I went to SwiftClan for help, like you asked. Goldenflame and Sedgetail are here with me."

"Ripplestar wouldn't send anyone to help," Rookshade said, "but we might be able to move the stump, if we push hard enough."

Almost instantly, Silvermist could hear the scuffling of their paws as they all struggled to push the stump away from the camp entrance. She quickly slipped into the bramble tunnel and tried to help pushing from the inside, but it wouldn't even budge. *How did they even manage to move this?*

"Don't push yourselves," Thistlestar murmured wearily. As she backed into the camp, she saw how his eyes had darkened. "It's too late—get yourselves and the SwiftClan warriors to safety, and please tell Vinestar the help was appreciated, even if it was a lost cause."

"Uncle . . . ." Silvermist murmured without realizing. By now, she could see smoke billowing above the trees, and could taste it in

the air with every breath. She became increasingly aware of how hot the forest had gotten; beneath the heat, panic crept up her pelt.

A sudden presence at her side helped her ground herself before her anxiety grew to be too much. With a glance over her shoulder, Silvermist saw that Cricketfern had wordlessly approached her. He blinked reassuringly at her before turning his gaze to their Clanmates. Silvermist mimicked him and realized how dire the situation was.

Dovesong murmured quiet comforts to the elders, who huddled together with fear in their eyes. Daisynose's wheezing could be heard across the camp, her chest visibly heaving with the effort it took to breathe. Ferrettail and Mintwillow, though both patched up thanks to the medicine cats, bore pained expressions as they stared at the thickening smoke. Most of their other Clanmates were considerably scraped up, though none as bad as the aforementioned warriors.

As the fire neared crackling noise and realized it was the sound of the forest burning. Suddenly, she remembered seeing those dark storm clouds when she left for Starfalls, and her heart finally leaped back into her chest.

"Surely it's not over yet," she mewed slowly, surprising herself with her steady voice. "Maybe the storm can save us?"

"What storm?" Rowanspots demanded, snapping her head up from where she had been inspecting Wrenfeather's wounds.

Silvermist glanced at the sky, grimacing when she realized the smoke blocked out any sign of the approaching storm. "I saw some intense clouds when I left to find Stormrunner. I was sure they were drifting this way." *StarClan wouldn't have doomed us like this.*

Despite Silvermist's hopeful words, Rowanspots only looked horrified. "StarClan, why?" she mumbled before retreating from Wrenfeather's form.

Icemint immediately stepped forward to reassure her, but Rowanspots didn't notice her as she padded toward the medicine

den and sat down. The molly's sudden change in behavior unsettled Silvermist; when she glanced around, she saw that most of her Clanmates felt the same. Newtsplash padded forward after a moment and sat by her sister, whispering soothingly to her.

Silvermist moved to offer more words of hope—the first thing that came to mind was their faith in StarClan. Before she could speak, however, a loud creaking noise broke through the air. The noise grew louder until it deafened Silvermist. A series of horrible cracking sounds soon followed, and then a large branch crashed down from a nearby tree. It lodged itself on the camp wall, its charred leaves reaching toward Thistlestar's den and the Highroot.

Even the camp is being destroyed, Silvermist thought, anguish masking her simmering anxiety. If their home couldn't protect itself against the fire, what hope did they have? She could only stare hopelessly at the branch until she noticed something else.

The branch *hadn't* destroyed the camp wall—at least, not entirely. It wasn't the thickest of branches, but it was secure where it rested—cats could climb across, if they were careful. Perhaps this was StarClan's mercy.

Silvermist's gaze darted around at her Clanmates. If everyone worked together, she knew they'd be able to climb out of the camp; these were her thoughts until she remembered the state of some of them. Daisynose could hardly breathe enough to move, and she doubted that Mintwillow or Ferrettail could climb onto the Highroot, let alone make the jump to the branch.

Desperately, Silvermist racked her brain for anything she could do to help her Clan. *I could help cats across, but they'd need someone to help them up and another to steady them once they're on the branch. I'm only one cat.* The smoke started to overwhelm her senses, dizzying her and blurring her thoughts. Despite it all, she did her best to think of a way to help.

The haze clouded her mind so much that she didn't notice a growing commotion from outside the camp. Beneath the crackling fire and her Clanmates' shrill voices, there was a fainter rustling noise. Silvermist looked back toward the fallen branch and saw it

swaying ever-so-slightly.

Even in the smoldering heat, Silvermist tried her best to pay attention to what was happening. When an outside force heaved a slightly smaller branch onto the camp wall, she gasped and rushed forward.

Someone came back to help! One by one, her Clanmates started noticing the branch as it shifted until it rested near the Highroot. Though it was thinner than the other, it was longer—it just might be enough for the others to start escaping.

"Cindertalon?" Thistlestar called out after struggling through a cough.

The smoke grew thicker with each passing heartbeat; Silvermist had to squint to see the edge of the camp. One of the only cats who would know just where to lodge the branch was Cindertalon—if he stayed, perhaps the SwiftClan warriors were with him! Her heart soared in her chest when she saw a flash of dark grey fur, only to plummet again when the smoke cleared slightly. On the branches rested a cat with long fur—far too long for it to be Cindertalon.

Then, they stepped out of the looming shadows of the forest. Gasps rippled around the camp as the smoke parted to reveal Stormrunner. He jumped from the branches to the Highroot before perching himself there.

"We have to move fast if you all want to survive." He spoke confidently, hardly waiting for anyone to address him. Then, he turned his gaze to meet Silvermist's. "Elders should go first, and then anyone who's injured."

His eyes glittered with a silent question as he stared at his sister. *Can you help me?* he asked, as if there was even a possibility that Silvermist would deny. Wordlessly, she approached the base of the leader's den and turned to face her Clanmates.

"You heard him!" she called out. "I'll give everyone a boost up from here, and Stormrunner will help you onto the bridge. Quickly!"

"I can help, too!" Sandfoot offered, stepping forward as Lynxtail approached with the elders. "Dawnstrike and I fought, but she hardly scratched me—I don't think she even used her claws. I'll make sure nobody falls off of the branches."

Stormrunner only offered a grunt of acknowledgement and nodded for Sandfoot to get into position. Once the older warrior situated himself near the camp wall, Stormrunner beckoned toward the elders. Quickly, Silvermist helped Lynxtail up towards her brother, who leaned down to pull the molly onto the Highroot by her scruff. Vinecrawl went next, followed by Snailbelly, Mistypool, and then Daisynose, who struggled more than the rest.

Ferrettail and Mintwillow approached next, both wincing at their injuries. Ferrettail, despite his wounds, still did his best not to be a dead weight in Stormrunner's grasp. Silvermist could see Mintwillow making a visible effort, though she faltered when she neared Stormrunner. Once both of them made it over the branches, Silvermist turned to call the medicine cats.

"You should go next," she said after catching their attention. "In case any of them get hurt."

"There's little we can do for them now," Rowanspots muttered as she passed Silvermist. Her voice, barely audible, sent chills down Silvermist's spine; the feeling lingered even after she and Icemint vanished over the camp walls.

Now, only the warriors were left with Wrenfeather and Thistlestar. Fire crackled dangerously over one of the sides of the camp, and Silvermist knew it would eat through the woven bramble walls sooner than they could afford. They were right to send the elders and injured out first—anyone escaping now would have to be twice as careful.

Silvermist glanced around at her remaining Clanmates. When she saw how frightened they looked, she did her best to appear confident. "Everyone, it will be okay! Once you're out of the camp, get to safety as quickly as possible. The bogs of SwiftClan or the river border with RushClan will be safest. If we're lucky, the SwiftClan warriors might be waiting at their borders to help us."

"I'll go last," Thistlestar announced, raising his head. "I have lives to spare, but the rest of you only have one. Please be safe, all of you."

As cats padded forward, Silvermist could only manage a nod in her uncle's direction. Newtsplash leaped onto the Highroot without help, but Wrenfeather struggled as he tried to follow her lead. Dovesong followed him quickly, trying to help her brother where Sandfoot and Stormrunner couldn't.

Falconwing, Cricketfern, and Waspcatcher left much more quickly than the rest of their Clanmates. Before Silvermist realized it, Thistlestar and Sandfoot had jumped down on the outside of the camp and she was following Stormrunner across the branches.

She leaped down from the makeshift bridge after her brother, flinching at how much hotter it was outside of the camp. They quickly started following the other NightClan cats, desperate to find shelter with them. Flames danced menacingly several tail-lengths away, some daring to grow closer to them when suddenly—

"Get back!" Stormrunner hissed, shoving Silvermist a few paces back.

A surge of hot air tickled her whiskers as a fiery branch plummeted from the forest's ceiling. It landed directly in their path, separating them from the cats who had carried on further. Silvermist felt her breath escape her as flames spread out before taming themselves slightly. Through the wall of fire, she could barely make out her uncle's white fur.

"Are you two okay?" Thistlestar called, stretching to try and keep them in his sight. "I can't see if there's a space to get through—"

"Forget it!" Stormrunner stepped away from Silvermist and looked around. "Just get to safety with the others. We'll find another way."

Another branch fell, only solidifying the idea that their path was blocked off. Thistlestar vanished without a word of argument, but Silvermist could see him glancing worriedly over his shoulder as he

did so.

"We should go to SwiftClan," Silvermist mumbled. She shied away from a thick patch of smoke before it could burn her eyes. "They'll help."

"No, we'll have to go to the river," Stormrunner shook his head and nodded to one of the only clear paths. "There's no way we can make it to SwiftClan territory now."

"Are you insane?" Silvermist gasped, noticing how the path was bordered by menacing walls of flames. "We'll burn before we get anywhere near the shore!"

Stormrunner let out an exasperated spew of words and started padding quickly toward the area. "Stop overanalyzing things and stick to the center of the safe path. It's our only option."

Silvermist was left with no choice but to follow him. Flames licked at the air near her fur, threatening to singe her if she wasn't careful. After what seemed like an eternity, they made it into more of an open space. The suffocating heat was no better here, and she could hardly see with all the smoke. Stormrunner squinted beside her, proving that he faced the same difficulties as her. *There has to be a way out—*

"Come on!" Cindertalon's voice broke through the screen of smoke. Silvermist turned and saw that he'd appeared out of the nearby undergrowth—even though the fire hadn't touched it, the gathering smoke nearly hid it from sight. "I helped a few to the river and came to help anyone who fell behind. Follow me, quickly!"

Before they could move, a shadow loomed out of the foliage from behind Cindertalon. Silvermist froze when she realized it was Oasis; his dark blue eyes reflected the light of the flames, filling her with a sense of sickening dread. She tensed and opened her mouth to call out a warning when Stormrunner barreled forward.

As Oasis lifted his claws to attack Cindertalon, Stormrunner knocked into his side and the two cats went sprawling. They landed

dangerously close to the flames, but neither seemed to notice as they fought and snarled.

"Stormrunner!" Silvermist called to him, crouching to bound toward the fight.

"Don't worry about me!" Stormrunner ordered between blows. His voice stopped Silvermist where she stood, but he didn't look away from their father. "Get to safety!"

"I'm not letting you vanish again!"

Just as Silvermist tried to step forward again, a sickening crack nearly deafened her. A small tree, encompassed by hungry flames, suddenly tore its roots out of the earth and crashed to the ground right where the toms had been fighting. The forest shook from the impact while hot smoke and dust particles went flying everywhere. Silvermist's breath caught in her throat as flames reached toward the sky and grasped at her.

"S-Storm!" she cried his name again, tearing her eyes over the burning tree. *No!*

"Silvermist, we have to go!" Cindertalon urged her after cursing under his breath. "We can't allow more unnecessary deaths, let's get to the river!"

The dark grey tom had to give Silvermist a harsh nudge for her body to finally move again. Desperately, she glanced over her shoulder one final time before following the elder warrior to safety.

The forest seemed to be endless, now that they had to weave through walls of flames and blinding smoke. Overhead, she could see how dark the sky had grown through the burning canopy—the storm from before loomed overhead now, and it looked like it would erupt onto the forest at any moment. *StarClan, please!* she pleaded as yet another flaming branch fell right in her path. Somehow, Silvermist managed to weave around it and keep Cindertalon in her sight.

Just when she thought they were getting close to the river, a

crack echoed through the air and shook the ground. She didn't stop moving—she knew she couldn't—as what started as a steady rain quickly turned into a relentless downpour. Her fur grew heavy as the water seeped into it, but she did her best to keep up with Cindertalon until they finally broke out of the forest.

Silvermist, now gasping for breath, took a few pawsteps into the river and looked back at the forest cautiously. The fire was seemingly unaffected by the pouring rain, still burning away happily at her home. All around her, she could hear the echoes of thunder and the pelting storm.

"Silvermist?!" A faint voice called her name, and when she glanced around, she spotted Lilypetal swimming easily through the now-turbulent river. "StarClan, are you okay? Where is everyone—and Waspcatcher?"

The silver molly could only stare helplessly at Lilypetal as she pulled herself out of the river. She didn't even have an answer—all she knew was that Stormrunner was somewhere back there, possibly *dead*. Beside her, Cindertalon muttered another string of curses before turning to her.

"We have to find the others," he hissed urgently. "I sent Rookshade with the SwiftClan warriors before I doubled back to help. We can travel down the river and along the southern border, maybe our Clanmates are there."

"Let me help!" Lilypetal offered immediately. Voices could hardly be heard across the river, and Silvermist had to squint to see what looked like Sleekthistle, Toadpounce, and Pebblestream at the other bank.

"Lily, come back!" Toadpounce called, sounding angry. "Ripplestar said we have to worry about ourselves, after the way newleaf treated us."

"Lilypetal—" Silvermist started before losing her voice. She desperately wanted to tell her friend that it was okay to go home; she wouldn't hold it against her, and if something *had* happened to Waspcatcher, this wasn't the way for her to find out.

"No, I'm going to help you," Lilypetal decided and nodded to them both. "I don't know how this happened, but I can't turn my back on you. Lead the way."

Cindertalon gave them both a brief glance before letting out a murmur of appreciation. Then he beckoned to them with his tail and set a swift pace down the river. Silvermist met his pace without a word; behind them, Lilypetal's patrol let out annoyed shouts. Normally, the sheet of rain would have felt like a wall for Silvermist to push through, but with the fire still raging through the forest beside them it seemed miniscule.

It wasn't until they neared the end of the river-marked border that they caught sight of their Clanmates. Standing at the water's edge, Silvermist made out the familiar pelts of Cricketfern, Waspcatcher, and what looked like a drenched Newtsplash. Seeing them safe sent a wave of relief through her, but it vanished when she realized it was *only* them.

"Waspcatcher!" Lilypetal called, sprinting forward.

"Are you hurt? Where is everyone?" Cindertalon asked as they neared the family. His question trailed off at the end, as if he wanted to ask more but couldn't.

"My mother and I got a few small burns when we got separated," Waspcatcher mewed slowly while Lilypetal hovered near him. "Falconwing was with us, but he went back to search for Ferrettail after we made it to the river."

"How long ago did he leave?" Cindertalon pressed, his tone growing sharp at the mention of his son. "That fire isn't showing any signs of stopping—he has to get out of there."

"It was quite some time ago," Newtsplash mewed worriedly. "Have you seen Wrenfeather anywhere? He was struggling when the fire split us up."

"We were with Stormrunner, but—" Silvermist finally found her voice, only to nearly lose it again at the thought of her brother. ". . . a branch fell into the fire and made us part ways. We haven't seen

anybody else."

"We have to keep searching," Cindertalon mewed, sounding more urgent than before. "You three, stay here—we'll send anyone we find this way."

"Let me come with you," Cricketfern offered with a step forward. When Silvermist glanced at him, she realized that he was worriedly looking her over.

"No," Cindertalon shook his head before Silvermist could answer. "If a patrol from another Clan nears, you'll be the best one to explain what's happening. Lilypetal, you should stay, too. I'd hate for your patrol to catch up and not see you here."

At that, Silvermist and Cindertalon set out again, squinting through the rain. They called out to their Clanmates every few paces, and Silvermist did her best to search for traces of them even though the storm had most likely washed most of it away.

"Cindertalon, what if—" she started anxiously, only to be cut off by a sound muffled by the rain.

Cindertalon didn't say anything, but he perked his ears and watched Silvermist expectantly. Silvermist shook her head a bit and tried to listen to the sounds beneath the storm. It took a few moments, but she finally realized she could hear someone coughing weakly.

"Hello?" she shouted immediately and started running toward the noise. "Who's out here? Speak up!"

Instead of hearing someone respond, all Silvermist heard was more coughing. She wasn't disappointed, though—she'd take anything at this point. With Cindertalon close on her tail, she ran toward the noise until she saw Daisynose, Mistypool, and Lynxtail huddling in the curve of a hollow tree trunk.

Oh, great StarClan, were the only words echoing in Silvermist's head. Daisynose was frighteningly still, and Lynxtail wasn't much better. All three of the elders bore patches of singed fur, and when

she got closer she realized that Daisynose wasn't even breathing. She was lifeless. Around them, patches of fire slowly died out to a quiet sizzle, but it didn't do much to reassure Silvermist. Not only was one of them dead, but she distinctly remembered the other two elders, the medicine cats, and both Ferrettail and Mintwillow being with them.

"Mistypool," she said slowly, ignoring the way her voice echoed in her ears. She eyed the burning forest warily as a pit formed in her stomach. "Where are Rowanspots and Icemint? Or the others that were with you?"

"Daisynose fell behind," the dark grey molly mewed sadly. "The smoke was too thick for her. Lynxtail and I tried to help her keep up, but the fire spread too quickly and cut us off, so we tried to shelter ourselves in the side of this trunk."

At that, Silvermist looked back toward Mistypool and Lynxtail. She inspected Lynxtail from where she stood, her heart dropping when she realized the eldest molly wasn't breathing, either.

"She's just asleep," Mistypool murmured quickly, as if realizing what Silvermist was thinking. "Come on, Lynx. Silvermist and Cindertalon are here to help us."

"Mistypool . . . ." Silvermist whispered her name again, flinching when her grandmother tried to nudge the molly at her side.

Lynxtail hardly moved, and when Mistypool got no response, she finally seemed to realize what was going on. The dark grey elder's ears fell back as she glanced between her sister and Lynxtail, her green eyes round with distraught. The sight tore a hole in Silvermist's heart, and she found herself quickly looking away.

"Here, I'll help you to the shore where the others are gathering," Cindertalon offered quietly. He stepped forward and helped Mistypool to her paws, and the dark-furred molly leaned against him with her head down. "Silver, keep searching along the border. I'll tell the others what happened."

Silvermist only managed a nod and took off. *Please, let the rest of*

them be together, she pleaded quietly to herself when her adrenaline gave way to hints of exhaustion. She glanced at the forest every few tail-lengths, relieved to see that the pouring rain was finally putting a dent into the flames, though she could still see smoke billowing into the sky from where the camp would be.

Stormrunner is gone. Our camp is no doubt destroyed—burnt to the ground. Part of her wondered if this was somehow her fault, but when she detected faint scents of her Clanmates all of her doubts vanished. Several cats' scents mixed together. They had been almost washed away by the storm, but it was certainly there.

Swiftly, she followed the fading trail to an unburnt patch of marshy earth just over the SwiftClan border. After taking a few pawsteps further, she caught sight of Rowanspots and Icemint huddling over the others in a flattened patch of damp grass. Then, she caught the faintest scent of blood, and rushed forward.

"Oh, thank StarClan," she breathed when she saw that nobody had died.

Vinecrawl and Snailbelly didn't appear to be hurt. Ferrettail and Mintwillow were there, too, and though they both looked like they were in a considerable amount of pain, they were okay. They were *alive.* Rowanspots and Icemint did their best to look after them, but once they heard Silvermist, they spun around.

"Silvermist, I'm glad you're okay!" Icemint gasped, her green eyes going wide. "Did you get separated from everyone, too?"

"Yeah," Silvermist watched Mintwillow carefully as she spoke, noticing how the molly kept one eye on her. "Cindertalon helped me find my way to the river. We, uh—while we were looking for others, we found Mistypool, Daisynose, and Lynxtail. Daisynose and Lynxtail . . . they didn't make it. Cindertalon sent me ahead, and he's helping Mistypool to the riverbed."

"O-Oh," Icemint whispered, backing away. "Is anyone else . . . ?"

"None that I can confirm," Silvermist mumbled, looking down. *I didn't see Stormrunner's body. There's still a chance.* "Cricketfern,

Waspcatcher, and Newtsplash are all waiting by the river's edge, too."

"Is that where you're having everyone gather?" Rowanspots spoke for the first time, her eyes set on the two wounded cats in front of them. "That's a bit of a journey . . . ."

"Will everyone be okay?" Silvermist asked quietly. "I'm still trying to find the others, but I can help you get there first."

"No, Icemint and I can handle it." Just like that, Rowanspots' voice switched back to her usual sharp tone. "The fire here has died down enough to move. I thought I heard Thistlestar and the others moving further along the border—go find them."

"Of course. Good luck," Silvermist mewed and dipped her head. "Please keep an eye out for Falconwing while you head there. He was with the others, but they said he went searching for Ferrettail."

Ferrettail's ears pricked at her words, but she didn't stick around long enough to speak more. Now that the storm was putting the fire out, she knew she had to find the rest of her Clanmates soon. Rowanspots and Icemint both murmured their farewells to her as she raced back into the rain.

Thankfully, she didn't have to travel far before she heard voices through the rain and picked up a much stronger trail of NightClan scent. This time, she followed it further into SwiftClan territory until she stopped at a thick patch of moor grass. She carefully nosed her way through the towering sedge until she spotted the rest of her Clanmates, though she still couldn't spot Falconwing among them.

Even Goldenflame and Sedgetail were there, both glancing at one another worriedly. Thistlestar, Wrenfeather, Dovesong, Sandfoot, and Rookshade were all there—all of them except for Rookshade were muttering anxiously to each other. Instead of speaking, the black-furred tom trailed his eyes along the sky. As soon as Silvermist poked her head into sight, his gaze snapped to her, but he said nothing.

"Our Clanmates are probably back there—" Dovesong hissed in a

whisper, lashing her tail. "We have to help them!"

"We can't help them when the fire is still raging," Sandfoot countered quickly. "We'd just put ourselves at risk!"

Both Thistlestar and Wrenfeather looked at a loss for words, and none of them seemed to notice Silvermist's arrival until she stepped forward. "Almost everyone else is safe," she mumbled when their attention shifted to her. "I've been trying to gather everyone up. Are any of you hurt?"

"Most of our injuries are superficial," Thistlestar responded after glancing at the others. "A few burns, but nothing serious. Who's still missing?"

"Only Falconwing, but I can explain on the way," Silvermist quickly started to back out of the sedge and beckoned for them to follow. "Everyone will be waiting for us by the river."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The sun cast a warm glow on the NightClan camp, despite how far into leaf-fall it was. Three moons had passed since the fire, but the Clan had a long way to go to recover from the tragedy. Parts of the camp walls were still charred and ashen-colored, and the forest itself wasn't much better. Silvermist breathed in the crisp air as she helped Ferrettail weave fresh brambles into the walls around the dens. He'd been quiet ever since Thistlestar welcomed him back into the Clan, and though others still eyed him warily, she felt thankful for his quiet presence right now.

His own lack of speech meant Silvermist didn't feel obliged to make awkward small-talk; instead, she was free to let her mind wander. They'd been so busy rebuilding the camp and keeping the Clan fed that she'd hardly had time to contemplate everything that had happened, so she eagerly took the chance to let her mind wander.

Shortly after the fire died out, they all returned to camp. They found Falconwing mostly unscathed; he seemed relieved to see Ferrettail was okay, though he and Mintwillow both needed time to heal from their injuries before they could help the Clan. While Ferrettail healed, Mintwillow's wounds grew infected, and she passed away—something Silvermist still felt unexpectedly mournful about. *I may not have forgiven her, but I wish we had more time to reconnect,* she remembered saying to Thistlestar when they held a vigil for her.

As she wove the last of the tendrils into the camp walls, she thought that Stormrunner should have been there. He should have been there to celebrate their survival, to mourn for those that they lost, and to be recognized for what he did for the Clan. Every day for a moon, Thistlestar led patrols to search for him, but they never found a trace. They couldn't even find a body to confirm his death—it was as if he had simply vanished. For some time, Oasis and the rogues weren't seen, either. Shortly after they stopped searching,

one of the dawn patrols found Oasis' body floating along the river's shore. It was only a short ways before the path that leads to Starfalls, and afterwards rumors quickly spread around the Clans that Shade's rogues were disbanded.

Silvermist's dreams remained as normal as can be. She hadn't found herself in a blackened void, nor had she seen any of Silverpelt's territory—StarClan *or* the Place of No Stars—since the day she almost died. Even though this was expected, she'd found herself hoping to see the strange ancestor again to get some kind of answers.

She turned around, padding to the camp entrance where a pile of bushes and brambles sat. On the way there, she passed Sandfoot and Dovesong, who carried bundles of moss to the medicine den. Silvermist flicked her ear in acknowledgement as she passed them, remembering how, for some sunrises, Sandfoot said he was considering joining SwiftClan to be with his mate and kits. Part of her couldn't blame him—his kits were apprenticed early, and one fell sick with the same illness that had claimed the lives of several SwiftClan cats. And then, all of NightClan nearly lost everything with the fire. She'd want to be with her family, too.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather before the Highroot!" Thistlestar yowled before Silvermist could grab more of the brambles.

Curiously, she turned and trotted where everyone else was quickly gathering. She wasn't sure what he could be announcing, since there were no kits, nor any apprentices, and nothing eventful had happened for quite some time. Stealing a glance at Sandfoot, she wondered if he finally made the decision to leave for SwiftClan, but he looked just as curious as she felt. She looked back up at her uncle, whose expression gave nothing away.

"Wrenfeather, Rowanspots, and I have discussed what I'm about to announce for some time now," he said once everyone was gathered. "Now that things have settled, we decided it's time to install a new role into the life of NightClan warriors. The stealthiest of you will be able to earn this title alongside that of a warrior, and you'll be known as *shades."*

"What do we need that for?" Waspcatcher asked, his head tilted. "Haven't things been peaceful?"

"Yes," Thistlestar responded without skipping a beat. "This will help to keep the peace from within. If any member of the Clan possesses the kind of stealth it requires to be a shade, they'll be taught how to survey the whole territory in secrecy. *And,"* he added when he saw some move to speak again, "Rookshade and Cindertalon will be our first shades!"

At first, Silvermist heard some confused murmurs, but she quickly offered a cheer for her old mentor. Others followed her lead, shouting the toms' names into the air. Once the noise died down, Wrenfeather stood up from where he sat beneath the Highroot.

"I've also decided to retire from my duties as the Clan deputy," the golden-brown dappled tom announced. "I'll serve a few more moons out as a warrior, but I feel that I'm too old to succeed Thistlestar when the time comes. I'm glad to have served you all as the deputy, and I look forward to working beside you all for the moons to come."

Cheers rose again, though they were quieter this time as Wrenfeather padded into the crowd and sat next to Newtsplash. Silvermist watched her uncle curiously, wondering who he would choose as the next deputy; only a few of their Clanmates have had apprentices, and even fewer seemed to *want* to take Wrenfeather's place. Thistlestar seemed to be at a bit of a loss for a moment, but he quickly recovered.

"I hoped to have a few more moons to make my decision," the white tom admitted after a few moments, "since most of those who meet the requirements have said they're happy in their positions. Dovesong said that, like Wrenfeather, she thinks she's not young enough to succeed me when my time comes—that leaves Cindertalon, Sandfoot, Ferrettail, and Newtsplash."

Silvermist pricked her ears at the mention of Ferrettail. Because of what happened with the rogues, she hadn't initially considered him, but now that she thought about it she realized that his calm

demeanor *would* make him a nice candidate. Neither Newtsplash nor Sandfoot seemed like they'd be the type to step into a position of authority, and Cindertalon was literally just given a second role —who else could it be?

She saw her uncle gazing down at Ferrettail and realized he shared her thoughts. Just as it looked like he was ready to decide, however, his gaze shifted toward Cindertalon.

"Cindertalon, I know I've just made you a shade," he spoke slowly, as if he wasn't entirely sure of his decision. "You've also expressed that you don't *want* to be NightClan's next leader, but you're one of the most level-headed cats I know. Would you be willing to stand in as our deputy until someone more suitable shows themself?"

As he offered the position to Cindertalon, Thistlestar glanced toward Ferrettail once again. Silvermist immediately understood his reasoning. *Ferrettail would be a great choice—he sacrificed* everything *for us!* she thought to herself. *But he still needs time for the others to trust him again.*

For a few moments, Cindertalon didn't respond. Silvermist watched as he kept his gaze locked on Thistlestar and, finally, he nodded. "Of course, Thistlestar. If being a shade ends up taking too much time, though, I hope you understand. I might need help managing things."

He quickly bowed his head, but Silvermist didn't miss the way he sent a knowing glance in Ferrettail's direction. If they didn't get new apprentices for the younger warriors, she felt certain Ferrettail would be the one to take Cindertalon's spot when the time came.

"I have one more announcement I'd like to make," Thistlestar said when the Clan started going back to their duties. "If you'd all spare me just a few more moments. You can come in, now!"

When the leader turned his stare toward the camp entrance, Silvermist turned to do the same. The patched-up tunnel rustled a bit, as if someone was coming into the camp. Rowanspots appeared first with a tiny bundle of white fur grasped gently in her teeth.

Silvermist perked her ears and looked closer, noticing how it had greyish-black splotches in its fur. *A kit?!* Before she or anyone else had time to respond, Dawnstrike appeared with a second kit. This one was dark cream with grey patches. They were so tiny, they couldn't have been born much more than a half moon ago.

Nobody said anything for a long time. Rowanspots stopped about halfway into the camp, and Dawnstrike tried unsuccessfully to hide behind the tall molly. Silvermist could only stare in shock, though something compelled her to get closer.

"Dawnstrike?" Vinecrawl whispered in disbelief from her spot outside the elders' den. The old yellow tabby opened her mouth as if she wanted to say more, but no words came out.

"Over the last few moons, Rowanspots and I met with Dawnstrike in secret," Thistlestar announced, though he spoke at a normal volume as he hopped down from the Highroot and padded forward. "She wishes to return to us and be part of our Clan again—with her kits, of course. Even as your leader, I can't bring myself to do something the rest of you aren't okay with, but . . . ."

As he trailed off, Thistlestar glanced at the two kits and sat near Dawnstrike. Silvermist watched for a few moments before glancing at the Clan around her. Most of her Clanmates looked shocked, but a few looked distrustful, and she felt her stomach sink.

"She fought against us when the rogues set fire to the forest," Dovesong's voice echoed uncomfortably, even though it was only a murmur. "Now she wants to come back?"

"I was the only one she fought," Sandfoot argued quickly. "And she didn't even use her claws."

"I say we let her stay," Silvermist quickly spoke up when she saw several others prepare to argue. When everyone turned to her in shock, she looked toward Dawnstrike. Holding the molly's surprised green eyes, she said, "We haven't even given her a chance to explain herself. We gave Ferrettail and Mintwillow the same opportunity, and if Stormrunner stayed, we would have done the same for him. It's only fair to give her the same chance."

"Silvermist is right," Icemint's mew caught attention this time. Silvermist turned and saw the molly padding forward to inspect the two little kits. "Don't forget that leafbare is only a few moons away—maybe even less. It would be cruel to turn away *anyone* when such a harsh season is nearing, especially someone with two young kits. I say we at least let them stay until newleaf comes, and if you don't trust her by then, we can figure out what to do."

After that, several Clanmates started murmuring their agreement. Even Dovesong looked apologetic, and gave Thistlestar a nod of approval.

"It's settled, then," the leader mewed slowly. He turned to Dawnstrike and looked at the kits once again. "Have you named them yet?"

"Yes," Dawnstrike whispered for the first time. "The cream-and-grey she-kit is Marigoldkit, and the little white one with spots is Fogkit."

"Icemint, get moss to help prepare a nest for these three," Rowanspots mewed. Without waiting for anyone else to speak, she started carrying Fogkit toward the nursery. "And check for borage while you're in there. Dawnstrike, come with me."

Once Dawnstrike vanished into the nursery, Thistlestar beckoned to Cindertalon and led him to a secluded spot at the edge of the clearing. Instead of going straight back to repairing the camp, Silvermist saw how most of her Clanmates grabbed a meal to share and lingered around to chat. Deciding she could use a break, too, she looked around for Cricketfern; when she spotted him, she saw that he was talking to Wrenfeather and Newtsplash, and decided to let them have time together.

Waspcatcher, however, was sitting by himself with a small mouse. Sandfoot, Ferrettail, and Falconwing weren't far away, but since he didn't seem like he wanted to join them, Silvermist trotted over to greet him. *He's been more . . . tolerable lately,* she thought to herself as she approached the tom.

"Mind if I sit with you?" Silvermist asked when she caught his

attention. "Cricketfern looked a little busy, so—"

"Sure," Waspcatcher mumbled flatly through a mouthful of mouse. "I guess I wouldn't *hate* the company. Besides, Cricket told me to be nicer to you."

At first, his words stung. However, with a second glance at him, Silvermist caught a gleam of amusement in his eyes and couldn't help rolling her own. She sat down near him and opened her mouth to speak, but before she could she heard the nearby group muttering to each other.

"RushClan should have helped us," Sandfoot mewed to their Clanmates. "We helped them when their camp flooded, and they gave us nothing in return."

"Ripplestar couldn't have known how bad it would get," Ferrettail murmured. He sounded surprisingly soothing as he spoke, but Sandfoot ignored it.

"They would have seen the fire from their camp!" Sandfoot growled quietly, narrowing his eyes. "And Ripplestar had the nerve to say she was *worried* about us after! Selfish fish-eaters."

"Hey!" Silvermist gasped, though she stayed seated. "Unless you've forgotten, Lilypetal helped us, even though her patrol tried to call her back."

"Yeah," Waspcatcher agreed and casually rose to his paws. He glared at Sandfoot before continuing. "Plus, they can't help what Ripplestar orders them to do!"

"What, are you loyal to them, now?" Falconwing's voice was so quiet—and surprisingly nonchalant—that Silvermist almost didn't hear it. She stared at him in disbelief while Waspcatcher let out a growl and stepped forward.

"You know that's not true," he snapped, lashing his tail. "Just because we're friends with cats from other Clans doesn't make us any less loyal than you. And don't even mention my mate—Sandfoot has kits in SwiftClan, and we'd *never* question his loyalty."

Falconwing blinked in surprise—he clearly didn't expect a response. "You're right," he meowed after receiving a harsh nudge from Ferrettail. "I'm sorry, both of you."

"Me too," Sandfoot muttered begrudgingly. "I'd defend Sorrelfrost and my kits, too, if someone talked poorly of them."

They all fell quiet after that. Waspcatcher smoothed his fur and sat back down, but Silvermist couldn't ignore how uneasy she felt now. RushClan was one of their neighboring Clans and had just suffered a *devastating* newleaf, of course Ripplestar would want to worry about her own. *Besides,* she thought with a glance at Sandfoot, *we shouldn't help the other Clans just for them to owe us for it.*

After some time, Cricketfern joined them with a squirrel. He offered to share it with Silvermist, who eagerly agreed after realizing how hungry she was. She tried to set aside her ill feelings as she talked to him and Waspcatcher. They had all survived a horrible event, and they should all be happy to be able to see the future with their Clanmates. The forest still had a long way to recover, and as Cricketfern's pelt brushed against hers, she silently hoped that the approaching leafbare would be kinder than the last.

Epilogue

The air carried the warm scent of greenleaf with it as it blew gently through the new and improved NightClan camp. The sun, high in the sky, provided plenty of warm patches for both the elders and the silver-furred queen to rest in. Warriors bustled about doing their duties, while the shades wove silently between their Clanmates as they prepared for their next surveillance task.

Silvermist let out a purr of amusement as she watched her kits tackle Cricketfern. While they rolled around in the dust outside the nursery, she made a mental note to thank him for distracting them later—even though they were only two moons old, they were *surprisingly* rambunctious. She didn't recall Dawnstrike's kits being so energetic at this age, but she wasn't exactly complaining; it was great entertainment.

"Take that, you smelly fox!" exclaimed Finchkit, a brown molly with darker seal-point markings and blue eyes. She swatted playfully at Cricketfern's muzzle, and he pretended to reel back in surprise.

"Ah, you got me!" he nearly choked on his laughter. He seemed to spot something and narrowed his eyes mischievously. "Or so you thought! Here comes my big brother, an even meaner fox than I!"

Silvermist perked her ears when Waspcatcher came bounding over to playfully sabotage her kits' victory. The golden tom scooped Finchkit off of Cricketfern, then pretended to be surprised when she wriggled onto his back.

"Stormkit, get his paws!" Finchkit cheered as she grasped tightly onto Waspcatcher's shoulders. "This fox is tougher than any NightClan has ever seen before!"

The grey tabby she-kit launched herself off of Cricketfern's tail and knocked into Waspcatcher's paws, desperately trying to trip him.

"Your kits are already so strong," Icemint commented fondly as she padded up to Silvermist. "They'll turn into fine warriors."

"I certainly hope so," the silver-point molly responded, unable to take her eyes away from her family. "Taking a break from stocking the herbs?"

"More like catching a breath," Icemint joked, flicking her ears toward the elders. "Wrenfeather is the youngest elder, but he complains more than Vinecrawl and Snailbelly combined—and they're getting *pretty* old."

Silvermist had to hold back a snort of laughter at how easily Icemint talked like that. With a glance toward the elders' den, she caught Wrenfeather and Mistypool sharing a sun-patch and watching the kits from afar.

"I'd be willing to bet a moon's worth of voles that he did that on purpose," Silvermist purred quietly and turned her gaze back to her mate and kits.

Waspcatcher mimicked what he seemed to think were fox calls, though to Silvermist it just sounded like awkward squawks and exaggerated growls. Then, he purposefully winked at Cricketfern and tumbled to the ground, taking both kits with him. Cricketfern jumped back into the fray, but this time, he hoisted Stormkit onto his shoulders and taunted Finchkit into chasing after them.

"I can't wait for these two to meet Eveningkit and Dacekit!" Waspcatcher purred to Cricketfern, apparently taking a break from their playfight. "They're just as playful; they'd get along great, and I'm sure Lilypetal could use the distraction, too."

Then, both kits went barreling at him. Cricketfern let out a surprised grunt when Stormkit launched herself off of his back, only to skid nose-first into Waspcatcher's side.

"We wanna meet them, Uncle Wasp!" Finchkit mewed loudly, her eyes wide.

"Yes!" Stormkit agreed, nodding her head wildly. "Can we meet

Eveningkit and Dacekit? Please?"

"Look what you started," Cricketfern groaned, though his eyes held an amused glint. Waspcatcher only laughed and promised he'd introduce them someday.

Icemint cleared her throat quietly, drawing Silvermist's attention away again. "I know it's not my place as a medicine cat to worry about these things, but things have gotten . . . tense with RushClan. You should be careful, Silv."

Silvermist let out a soft laugh, trying to ignore the unease that sparked in her stomach. "What do you mean? Things seemed okay when I moved into the nursery, and Waspcatcher doesn't seem worried."

"It's because of what happened last greenleaf," Icemint added quietly, her green eyes dark. "Even Riverflower seems distant lately—she's a medicine cat, we're supposed to be separate from stuff like this."

"You mean during The Burning?" Silvermist frowned a bit, recalling how some of her Clanmates were more than ready to voice the grudge they held. "Ripplestar was just timid—she was still new to the whole leadership thing back then, and Wolfstar certainly didn't leave her much to work with. I probably would have done the same."

"Most of us agree, but I've heard some call it cowardly," Icemint murmured and glanced at someone across the camp. "Our warriors don't usually mingle during Gatherings anymore, either."

Silvermist blinked in surprise at that. "I only thought a few held a grudge over that—besides, why would RushClan cats need to be wary of us?"

"It's actually some of our Clan causing the tension," Icemint casually groomed a spot of fur on her shoulder, as if she were trying to hide what she said. "Sandfoot and Newtsplash have been surprisingly vocal about it, and so has Falconwing. Even Thistlestar wasn't happy about how things happened."

"My uncle?" Silvermist pricked her ears and spotted the leader talking to Cindertalon and Ferrettail beneath the Highroot. "He always seemed to understand why Ripplestar didn't send help."

"He tried to be, but our Clanmates have died." Icemint sighed quietly. "He tries to hide his feelings from the rest of the Clan, since he doesn't want a repeat of what happened with Wolfstar. Rowanspots told me she has a bad feeling about the future, too. Marigoldpaw and Fogpaw have been picking up the behavior of our Clanmates."

"I understand Marigoldpaw mimicking Falconwing's opinions, but why Fogpaw?" Silvermist mewed, growing bewildered. "You'd think having Waspcatcher as his mentor would help."

The medicine cat just shook her head. "All I know is that you should raise your kits to be as understanding as you've tried to be. If this keeps up, we're going to need that kindness come the next several seasons."

some moons later

Stormrunner padded carefully through a thin layer of snow, careful to stay away from the NightClan border. Nyx walked by his side, with a few sprigs of mint clamped securely in her teeth. They walked together in silence, Stormrunner glancing toward the border every few paces until they found a hidden spot just outside the old Twoleg clearing. They both settled in the shelter of a bush; Nyx dropped the mint at her paws while Stormrunner peeked around the branches.

"Why do you stay?" Nyx asked after a few moments. "Obviously I don't have a problem with it, or else I wouldn't be here, but I can't help feeling curious. We haven't seen your sister on a patrol for moons—for all we know, she could have died."

"I'd know if she was dead, Nyx," Stormrunner snapped quickly before composing himself. "Rookshade stopped meeting me before the fire, and she was alive then, too."

"Well, you never *truly* know," Nyx countered easily. "She could have gotten sick, and you just wouldn't know."

Stormrunner turned to give her a sharp glare before turning his attention back to the border. *I can hardly even see from here—maybe I can find a better spot closer to the edge of the clearing.* Without saying anything, he crept closer, searching for another bush to cover his presence. He could hear Nyx shifting behind him, and figured she was picking up the mint to follow him.

"Do you still get those nightmares?" Nyx spoke again after a silence.

"Nightmares?" Stormrunner echoed, forgetting that he was annoyed with her. He glanced over his shoulder after settling behind a large tree. "You mean my dream-training?"

"Yeah, that," she mumbled, setting the mint down once again. "It certainly sounded like a nightmare to me—you would always wake up with strange wounds."

"Those stopped shortly after I met Oasis and joined the old group," Stormrunner mumbled with a shrug. "The ancestor that visited me—Pearlstep, she said it wasn't safe for her to train me anymore. I don't know what it meant, but I don't question strange Silverpelt things."

"Aren't ancestors supposed to be all-knowing and powerful?" Nyx snorted quietly, settling down in the snow.

"That's what I thought, too," the tom gave another shrug and glanced back at the border. Where was the patrol?

"Why don't you go back?" Nyx shot another question at him. If he wasn't used to this by now, Stormrunner would have cuffed her over the ear.

"I just don't think it would go over well," he answered simply. "It's easier to watch over them from a distance."

Nyx scoffed and rolled her eyes. *"This* is almost more confusing than anything Sister Shade ever did. The only thing worse was

when she retired after Oasis was found dead."

At the mention of his father, Stormrunner felt his skin crawl. He caught a knowing glance from the molly and promptly ignored it, instead saying, "I think it would be strained. I . . . I don't know how I could face them all again, especially when I'm not sure how they feel about things. Besides, even if it's strange, this is kind of nice. Just two pals looking out for each other."

"And for your old Clan," Nyx added, sounding a bit amused.

Before Stormrunner could offer a retort, he finally heard a border patrol approaching in the distance. He quickly ducked behind the tree, peeking out to get a good look at who was on it. He easily recognized Newtsplash, Dovesong, and Sandfoot, and saw a smaller grey tabby molly with them.

He waited, hoping Silvermist would show up behind them, but that was it. She didn't, though, and he frowned and carefully turned to creep away.

"Pay attention, Stormpaw!" Dovesong's aged and tired voice echoed easily through the trees, stopping Stormrunner in his tracks. "StarClan knows what kind of trouble you'll get into if you aren't careful out here."

Stormrunner quickly turned around and peered more closely at the smaller cat with the patrol. Nyx was still beside him, not questioning as he stared at the grey-furred apprentice that suddenly looked so familiar. *Is she named after me?*

"On second thought," he stammered after taking a few moments to register it, "maybe we could go—just to visit?"

"I thought you'd never get the courage to say it," Nyx purred in laughter, tilting her head toward the patrol. "Come on. I'm sure your family has missed you."